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SERIOUS ENQUIRY

INTO THE

NATURE AND EFFECTS

OF THE

STAGE.

Being an Attempt to ſhow,

That contributing to the Support of a PUBLIC THEATRE, is inconſiſtent with the Character of a Chriſtian.

By *JOHN WITHERSPOON*, M.A.
Miniſter of the Goſpel in *Beith*.

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TO

THE MOST HONOURABLE

JOHN Marquis of TWEEDALE,

Earl of GIFFORD,

Viſcount of WALDEN,

Lord HAY of YESTER,

The following TREATISE is humbly inſcribed by

His LORDSHIP's

moſt obedient, and

moſt humble Servant,

JOHN WITHERSPOON.

A SERIOUS ENQUIRY INTO THE NATURE and EFFECTS of the STAGE.

THE Reader will probably conjecture, and therefore, I do readily acknowledge, that what gave occaſion both to the writing, and publiſhing the enſuing treatiſe, was the new Tragedy of Douglaſs lately acted in the threatre at Edinburgh. This, univerſal uncontradicted fame ſays, is the work of a miniſter of the church of Scotland. One of that character and office employing his time in writing for the ſtage, every body will allow, is a very new and extraordinary event. In one reſpect neither author nor actors have ſuffered any thing from this circumſtance: for doubleſs, it contributed its ſhare in procuring that run upon the repreſentation, which continued for ſeveral days. Natural curioſity prompted many to make trial, whether there was any difference between a play wrote by a clergyman, and one of another author. And a concern for the fate of ſuch a perſon excited the zeal and diligence of friends, to do all in their power to procure a full houſe, that the bold adventurer might be treated with reſpect and honour.

Some reſolutions of the preſbytery of Edinburgh ſeem to threaten, that public notice will be taken of this author and his aſſociates by their ſuperiors in the church. Whether this will be carried on, and, if it be, whether they will be approven or cenſured; and, if the laſt, to what degree, I pretend not to foretell. But one thing is certain, that it hath been and will be the ſubject of much thought and converſation among the laity of all ranks, and that it muſt have a very great influence upon the ſtate of religion among us, in this part of the nation. That

this influence will be for the better, tho' I reſolve to examine the ſubject with all impartiality, I confeſs, I ſee little ground to hope. There is no doubt that it will be condemned by the great plurality of thoſe who go by the appellation of the ſtricter ſort. With them, it will bring a great reproach upon the church of Scotland, as containing one miniſter who writes for the ſtage, and many who think it no crime to attend the repreſentation. It is true no other conſequences are to be apprehended from their diſpleaſure, than the weakeſt of them being provoked to unchriſtian reſentment, or tempted to draw raſh and general concluſions from the conduct of a few to the character of the whole, or perhaps ſome of them ſeparating from the eſtabliſhed church, none of which effects of late have been much either feared or ſhunned. However, even upon this account, it were to be wiſhed, either that it had never happened, or that it could be ſhewn, to the conviction of unprejudiced minds, that it was a juſt and commendable action.

But, to be ſure, the chief danger is, that, in caſe it be really a bad thing, it muſt give very great offence, in the Scripture ſenſe of that word, to thoſe who are moſt apt to take it, *viz.* ſuch as have leaſt religion or none at all. An offence is a ſtumbling block over which the weak and unſtedfaſt are in danger of falling; that is to ſay, It emboldens them to commit, and hardens them in the practice of ſin. Now, if the ſtage is unlawful or dangerous to a Chriſtian, thoſe who are by inclination ſo addicted to it that it is already difficult to convince them of their error, muſt be greatly confirmed in this error, by the example and countenance of ſuch as call themſelves miniſters of Chriſt. It has accordingly already occaſioned more diſcourſe among the gay part of the world in defence or commendation of the ſtage than paſt, perhaps, for ſome years preceeding this event.

Nothing therefore can be more ſeaſonable at this time, or neceſſary for the publick good, than a careful and accurate diſcuſſion of this queſtion, Whether ſupporting and encouraging *tage-*

plays

plays by writing, acting or attending them, is conſiſtent or inconſiſtent with the character of a Chriſtian. It is to no purpoſe to confine the enquiry to this, Whether a miniſter is not appearing in an improper light, and miſapplying his time and talents when he dedicates them to the ſervice of the ſtage. That point would probably be given up by moſt, and thoſe who would deny it, do not merit a confutation. But if the matter is reſted here, it will be conſidered only as a ſmaller miſdemeanour, and though treated or even condemned as ſuch, it will ſtill have the bad effect, (upon ſuppoſition of theatrical amuſements being wrong and ſinful), of greatly promoting them, tho' we ſeem to be already as much given to them as even worldly conſiderations will allow.

The ſelf-denying Apologies common with authors, of their being ſenſible of their unfitneſs for the taſk they undertake, their doing it to ſtir up a better hand, and ſo on, I wholly paſs, having never read any of them with approbation. Prudence is good, and I would not willingly loſe ſight of it, but zeal and concern for the glory of God, and faithfulneſs to the ſouls of others, are duties equally neceſſary in their place, but much more rare. How far I am ſenſible of my own unfitneſs, for treating this ſubject, and of the reputation that is riſked by attempting it, the world is not obliged to believe upon my own teſtimony; but in whatever degree it be, it is greatly overballanced at preſent by a view of the declining ſtate of religion among us, the prevalence of national ſins, and the danger of deſolating judgments.

It is ſome diſcouragement in this attempt that it is very uncertain, whether many of thoſe, for whoſe ſakes it is chiefly intended, and who ſtand moſt in need of information upon the ſubject, will take the pains to look into it. Such a levity of ſpirit prevails in this age, that very few perſons of faſhion will read or conſider any thing that is written in a grave or ſerious ſtile. Whoever will look into the monthly catalogues of books publiſhed in Britain for ſome years paſt, may be convinced of

this at one glance. What an immenſe proportion do Romances under the titles of Lives, Adventures, Memoirs, Hiſtories, *&c.* bear to any other ſort of production in this age? Perhaps, therefore, it may be thought that it would have been more proper to have gratified the public taſte, by raiſing up ſome allegorical ſtructure, and handling this ſubject in the way of wit and humour; eſpecially, as it ſeems to be a modern principle, that ridicule is the teſt of truth, and as there ſeems to be ſo large a fund for mirth in the character of a ſtage-playing prieſt. But tho' I deny not the lawfulneſs of uſing ridicule in ſome caſes, or even its propriety here, yet I am far from thinking it is the teſt of truth. It ſeems to be more proper for correction than for inſtruction, and, tho' it be fit enough to whip an offender, it is not unuſual, nor unſuitable, firſt to expoſtulate a little with him, and ſhew him that he deſerves it. Beſides, every man's talent is not equally fit for it, and indeed, now the matter ſeems to have been carried beyond a jeſt, and to require a very ſerious conſideration.

There is alſo, beſides ſome diſcouragement, a real difficulty in entering upon this diſquiſition. It will be hard to know in what manner to reaſon, or upon what principles to build. It were eaſy to ſhew the unlawfulneſs of ſtage-plays, by ſuch arguments as would appear concluſive to thoſe who already hate both them and their ſupporters: But it is not ſo eaſy to make it appear to thoſe who chiefly frequent them, becauſe they will both applaud and juſtify ſome of the very things that others look upon as the worſt effects of the practice, and will deny the very principles upon which they are condemned. The truth is, it is our having different views of the nature of religion, that cauſes different opinions upon this ſubject. For many ages there was no debate upon it at all. There were players, but they did not pretend to be Chriſtians themſelves, and they had neither countenance nor ſupport from any who did. Whereas now, there are abundance of advocates for the lawfulneſs, ſome for the uſefulneſs

fulneſs of plays; not that the ſtage is become more pure, but that Chriſtians are become leſs ſo, and have lowered the ſtandard or meaſure requiſite to attain and preſerve that character.

But there is ſtill another difficulty, that, whoever undertakes to write againſt plays, though the provocation is given by what they are, is yet always called upon to attack them, not as they are, but as they might be. A writer on this ſubject is actually reduced to the neceſſity of fighting with a ſhadow, of maintaining a combat with an ideal or imaginary ſort of Drama, which never yet exiſted, but which the defenders of the cauſe form by way of ſuppoſition, and which ſhall appear in fact in that happy future age, which ſhall ſee, what theſe gentlemen are pleaſed to ſtile, a well regulated ſtage. However little ſupport may ſeem to be given by this to a vitious and corrupted ſtage, there is no attender of plays, but, when he hears this chimæra defended, imagines it is his own cauſe that is eſpouſed, and, with great compoſure and ſelf-ſatisfaction, continues his practice. A conduct not leſs abſurd, than if one who was expreſſly aſſured a certain diſh of meat before him was poiſoned, ſhould anſwer thus, All meat is not poiſoned, and therefore I may eat this with ſafety.

It is very plain, that were men but ſeriouſly diſpoſed, and without prejudice deſiring the knowledge of their duty, it would not be neceſſary, in order to ſhew the unlawfulneſs of the ſtage as it now is, to combat it in its imaginary reformed ſtate. Such a reformation, were not men by the prevalence of vitious and corrupt affections, in love with it, even in its preſent condition, would have been long ago given up as a hopeleſs and viſionary project, and the whole trade or employment deteſted, on account of the abuſes that had always adhered to it. But ſince all advocates for the ſtage have, and do ſtill defend it in this manner, by forming an idea of it ſeparate from its evil qualities; ſince they defend it ſo far with ſucceſs, that many who would otherwiſe abſtain, do, upon this very account, allow themſelves in attending the theatre ſometimes, to their own hurt and that

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of others; and, as I am convinced upon the moſt mature deliberation, that the reaſon why there never was a well regulated ſtage in fact is becauſe it cannot be, the nature of the thing not admitting of it, I will endeavour to ſhew, that PUBLIC THEATRICAL REPRESENTATIONS either tragedy or comedy are, in their general nature, or in their beſt poſſible ſtate, unlawful, contrary to the purity of our religion; and that writing, acting or attending them, is inconſiſtent with the character of a Chriſtian. If this be done with ſucceſs, it will give great weight to the reflections which ſhall be added upon the aggravation of the crime, conſidering the circumſtances that at preſent attend the practice.

But, though I have thus far complied with the unreaſonable terms impoſed by the advocates for this amuſement, they muſt not proceed to any higher demand, nor expect, becauſe they have prevailed to have plays conſidered in the way that they themſelves deſire, that therefore the ſame thing muſt be done by religion, and that it muſt be lowered down to the deſcriptions they are ſometimes pleaſed to give of it. I will by no means attack plays upon the principles of modern relaxed morality. In that caſe, to be ſure, it would be a loſt cauſe. If ſome late writers on the ſubject of morals be permitted to determine what are the ingredients that muſt enter into the compoſition of a good man, that good man, it is agreed, may much more probably be found in the play-houſe than in any other place. But what belongs to the character of a Chriſtian muſt be taken from the holy Scriptures, the word of the living God. Notwithſtanding therefore, that through the great degeneracy of the age, and very culpable relaxation of diſcipline, not a few continue to be called Chriſtians, who are a reproach to the name, and ſupport and countenance one another in many practices contrary to the purity of the Chriſtian profeſſion, I ſhall beg leave ſtill to recur to the unerring ſtandard, and to conſider, not what many nominal Chriſtians are, but what every real Chriſtian ought to be.

In ſo doing I think I ſhall reaſon juſtly; and at the ſame time

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it is my reſolution, not only to ſpeak the ſenſe, but as often as poſſible the very language and phraſes of the Scripture, and of our pious fathers. Theſe are either become venerable to me for their antiquity or they are much fitter for expreſſing the truths of the goſpel and delineating the character and duty of a diſciple of Chriſt, than any that have been invented in latter times. As the growth or decay of vegetable nature is often ſo gradual as to be inſenſible; ſo in the moral world, verbal alterations, which are counted as nothing, do often introduce real changes, which are firmly eſtabliſhed before their approach is ſo much as ſuſpected. Were the ſtile, not only of ſome modern eſſays, but of ſome modern ſermons to be introduced upon this ſubject, it would greatly weaken the argument, though no other alteration ſhould be made. Should we every where put virtue for holineſs, honour, or even moral ſenſe for conſcience, improvement of the heart for ſanctification, the oppoſition between ſuch things and theatrical entertainments would not appear half ſo ſenſible.

By taking up the argument in the light now propoſed, I am ſaved, in a great meaſure, from the repetition of what has been written by other authors upon the ſubject. But let it be remembered, that they have clearly and copiouſly ſhown the corruption and impurity of the ſtage, and its adherents, ſince its firſt inſtitution, and that, both in the Heathen and Chriſtian world. They have made it undeniably appear, that it was oppoſed and condemned by the beſt and wiſeſt men both Heathens and Chriſtians in every age *. Its very defenders do all pretend

* Particularly at Athens, where it firſt had its birth, both Tragedy and Comedy were ſoon aboliſhed by public authority; and among the Romans, tho' this and other public ſhews were permitted in a certain degree, yet ſo cautious were that wiſe people of ſuffering them to be frequent, that they did not permit any public Theatre, when occaſionally erected, to continue above a certain number of days. Even that erected by M. Scaurus, which is ſaid to have coſt ſo immenſe a ſum as a million Sterling, was ſpeedily taken down. Pompey the Great was the firſt who had power and credit enough to get a Theatre continued. The

pretend to blame the abuſe of it. They do indeed alledge that this abuſe is not eſſential to it, but may be ſeparated from it; however all of them, ſo far as I have ſeen, repreſent this ſeparation as only poſſible or future; they never attempt to aſſign any Æra in which it could be defended as it then was, or could be affirmed to be more profitable than hurtful. Some writers do mention a few particular plays of which they give their approbation. But theſe have never yet, in any age or place, amounted to ſuch a number, as to keep one ſociety of players in conſtant employment, without a mixture of many more that are confeſſedly pernicious. The only reaſon of bringing this in view at preſent when it is not to be inſiſted on, is, that it ought to procure a fair and candid hearing to this attempt to prove, That the ſtage, after the greateſt improvement of which it is capable, is ſtill inconſiſtent with the purity of the Chriſtian profeſſion. It is a ſtrong preſumptive evidence in favour of this aſſertion, that, after ſo many years trial, ſuch improvement has never actually taken place.

It is, perhaps, alſo proper here to obviate a pretence in which the advocates of the ſtage greatly glory, that there is no expreſs prohibition of it to be found in ſcripture. I think a country-

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The opinion of Seneca may be ſeen in the following paſſage, *Nihil eſt tam damnoſum bonis moribus, quam in aliquo ſpectaculo deſidere. Tunc enim per voluptatem facilius vitia ſurrepunt.*

As to the primitive Chriſtians, ſee *Conſtit. Apoſt. lib.* 8. *cap.* 32. where actors and ſtage-players are enumerated among thoſe who were not to be admitted to Baptiſm. Many different councils appoint that they ſhall renounce their arts before they be admitted, and if they return to them ſhall be excommunicated. *Tertullian de Spectaculis, cap.* 22. obſerves, That the Heathens themſelves marked them with infamy, and excluded them from all honours or dignity. To the ſame purpoſe ſee *Aug. de Civ. Dei, lib.* 2. *cap.* 14. *Actores poeticarum fabularum removent a ſocietate civitatis---ab honoribus omnibus repellunt homines ſcenicos.*

The opinion of Moderns is well known, few Chriſtian writers of any eminence having failed to pronounce ſentence againſt the ſtage.

man of our own † has given good reaſons to believe, that the apoſtle Paul, in his epiſtle to the Epheſians, 5th chap. 4th ver. by *filthineſs*, *fooliſh talking and jeſting*, intended to prohibit the plays that were then in uſe. He alſo thinks it probable that the word Κωμοις, uſed in more places than one, and tranſlated *revelling*, points at the ſame thing. Whether his conjectures are juſt or not, it is very certain that theſe, and many other paſſages, forbid the abuſes of the ſtage, and if theſe abuſes be inſeparable from it, as there is reaſon to believe, there needed no other prohibition of them to every Chriſtian. Nay, if they never had been ſeparated from it till that time it was ſufficient, and it would be idle to expect that the ſcripture ſhould determine this problematical point, Whether they would ever be ſo in any after age. To aſk that there ſhould be produced a prohibition of the ſtage, as a ſtage, univerſally, is to preſcribe to the holy Ghoſt, and to require that the Scripture ſhould not only forbid ſin, but every form in which the reſtleſs and changeable diſpoſitions of men ſhall think fit to be guilty of it, and every name by which they ſhall think proper to call it. I do not find in Scripture any expreſs prohibition of maſquerades, routs and drums, and yet I have not the leaſt doubt, that the aſſemblies called by theſe names are contrary to the will of God, and as bad, if not worſe than the common and ordinary entertainments of the ſtage.

In order to make this enquiry as exact and accurate as poſſible, and that the ſtrength or weakneſs of the arguments on either ſide may be clearly perceived, it will be proper to ſtate diſtinctly, what we underſtand by the ſtage or ſtage-plays, when it is affirmed, that in their moſt improved and beſt regulated ſtate they are unlawful to Chriſtians. This is the more neceſſary, that there is a great indiſtinctneſs and ambiguity in the language uſed by thoſe who, in writing, or converſation, undertake to defend it. They analize and divide it into parts, and take ſometimes one part, ſometimes another, as will beſt ſuit their purpoſe. They aſk, What there can be unlawful in

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† The late Mr. Anderſon.

the ſtage abſtractly conſidered? Comedy is expoſing the folly of vice, and pointing out the ridiculous part of every character. And is not this commendable? Is not ridicule a noble mean of diſcountenancing vice? And is not the uſe of it warranted by the ſatire and irony that is to be found in the holy ſcriptures? Tragedy they ſay is promoting the ſame end in a way more grave and ſolemn. It is a moral lecture, or a moral picture, in which virtue appears to great advantage. What is hiſtory itſelf but repreſenting the characters of men as they actually were, and plays repreſent them as they may be. In their perfection, plays are as like hiſtory and nature, as the poet's art and actor's ſkill can make them. Is it then the circumſtance of their being written in dialogue that renders them criminal? Who will pretend that? Is it that they are publicly repeated or acted over? Will any one pretend, that it is a crime to perſonate a character in any caſe, even where no deceit is intended? Then farewell parables, figures of ſpeech, and the whole oratorial art. Is it a ſin to look upon the repreſentation? Then it muſt be a ſin to look upon the world which is the original, of which plays are the copy.

This is the way which thoſe who appear in defence of the ſtage ordinarily take, and it is little better than if one ſhould ſay, What is a ſtage-play? It is nothing elſe abſtractly conſidered but a company of men and women talking together; Where is the harm in that? What hinders them from talking piouſly and profitably, as well as wickedly or hurtfully? But, rejecting this method of reaſoning as unjuſt and inconcluſive, let it be obſerved, that thoſe who plead for the lawfulneſs of the ſtage, in any country, however well regulated, plead for what implies, not by accident, but eſſentially and of neceſſity the following things. (1.) Such a number of plays as will furniſh a habitual courſe of repreſentations, with ſuch changes as the love of variety in human nature neceſſarily requires. (2.) Theſe plays of ſuch a kind, as to procure an audience of voluntary ſpectators, who are able and willing to pay for being ſo en-

entertained. (3.) A company of hired players, who have this as their only buſineſs and occupation, that they may give themſelves wholly to it, and be expert in the performance. (4.) The repreſentation muſt be ſo frequent as the profits may defray the expence of the apparatus, and maintain thoſe who follow this buſineſs. They muſt alſo be maintained in that meaſure of luxury, or elegance, if you pleaſe, which their way of life, and the thoughts to which they are accuſtomed muſt make them deſire and require. It is a thing impracticable to maintain a player at the ſame expence as you may maintain a peaſant.

Now all theſe things do, and muſt enter into the idea of a well regulated ſtage, and, if any defend it without ſuppoſing this, he hath no adverſary that I know of. Without theſe there may be poets, or there may be plays, but there cannot be a play-houſe. It is in vain then to go about to ſhow, that there have been an inſtance or two, or may be, of treatiſes wrote in the form of plays that are unexceptionable. It were eaſy to ſhew very great faults in ſome of theſe moſt univerſally applauded, but this is unneceſſary. I believe it is very poſſible to write a treatiſe in the form of a Dialogue, in which the general rules of the Drama are obſerved, which ſhall be as holy and ſerious, as any ſermon that ever was preached or printed. Neither is there any apparent impoſſibility in getting different perſons to aſſume the different characters, and rehearſe it in ſociety. But it may be ſafely affirmed, that if all plays were of that kind, and human nature continue in its preſent ſtate, the doors of the play-houſe would ſhut of their own accord, becauſe no body would demand acceſs *; unleſs there were an act of parliament to force attendance,

* This furniſhes an eaſy anſwer to what is remarked by ſome in favour of plays, that ſeveral eminent Chriſtians have endeavoured to ſuppiant bad plays by writing good ones; as Gregory Nazianzen a father of the Church, and a perſon of great piety, and our countryman Buchanan. But did ever theſe plays come to repute? Were they formerly, or are they now acted upon the ſtage? The fate of their works proves that theſe good men judged wrong in attempting to reform the ſtage, and that the great majority of Chriſtians acted more wiſely who were for laying it wholly aſide.

dance, and even in that caſe, as much pains would probably be taken to evade the law obliging to attend, as are now taken to evade thoſe that command us to abſtain. The fair and plain ſtate of this queſtion then is, Whether it is poſſible or practicable, in the preſent ſtate of human nature, to have the above ſyſtem of things under ſo good a regulation, as to make the erecting, and countenancing the ſtage agreeable to the will of God, and conſiſtent with the purity of the Chriſtan profeſſion.

And here let us conſider a little, what is the primary, and immediate intention of the ſtage, Whether it be for amuſement and recreation, or for inſtruction, to make men wiſe and good. Perhaps, indeed, the greateſt part will chooſe to compound theſe two purpoſes together, and ſay it is for both: For amuſement immediately, and for improvement ultimately, that it inſtructs by pleaſing, and reforms by ſtealth. The patrons of a well regulated ſtage have it no doubt in their power to profeſs any of theſe ends in it they pleaſe, if it is equally capable of them all; and therefore, in one part or other of this diſcourſe, it muſt be conſidered in every one of theſe lights. But as it is of moment, becauſe of ſome of the arguments to be afterwards adduced, let the reader be pleaſed to conſider, how far recreation and amuſement enter into the nature of the ſtage, and are, not only immediately and primarily, but chiefly and ultimately intended by it.

If the general nature of it, or the end propoſed from it when well regulated, can be any way determined from its firſt inſtitution, and the ſubſequent practice, it ſeems plainly to point at amuſement. The earlieſt productions of that kind that are now extant are evidently incapable of any other uſe, and hardly even of that to a perſon of any taſte or judgment *. They uſually ac-

* This is confeſſed by a defender of the ſtage who ſays, 'Such of the comedies before his (that is Menander's) time, as have been preſerved to us, are generally very poor pieces, not ſo much ludicrous as ridiculous, even a mountebank's Merry Andrew would be hiſſed, now a days, for ſuch Puerilities as we ſee abounding in Ariſtophanes.' *Rem. on Anderſon's Poſitions concerning the unlawfulneſs of ſtage-plays*, page 8th.

accompanied the feaſts of the ancients in the houſes of the rich and opulent *, and were particularly uſed in times of publick rejoicing. They have, indeed, generally been conſidered, in all ages, as intended for entertainment. A modern author of high rank and reputation †, who would not willingly hurt the cauſe, conſiders them in this light, and this alone, and repreſents their improvement, not as lying in their having a greater moral tendency, but in the perfection of the poet's art, and the refinement of the taſte of the audience. It is only of late that men have begun to dignify them with a higher title. Formerly they were ever conſidered as an indulgence of pleaſure, and an article of luxury, but now they are exalted into ſchools of virtue, and repreſented as bulwarks againſt vice. It is probable, moſt readers will be apt to ſmile when they hear them ſo called, and to ſay to their defenders, This is but overdoing, preſerve them to us as innocent amuſements, and we ſhall not much contend for their uſefulneſs. It is, indeed, but an evidence of the diſtreſs of the cauſe, for their advocates only take up this plea when they are unable to anſwer the arguments againſt them upon any other footing. It may alſo appear that they are deſigned for amuſement, if we conſider who have been the perſons in all ages who have attended them, *viz.* The rich, the young, and the gay, thoſe who live in pleaſure, and the very buſineſs of whoſe lives is amuſement.

But not to inſiſt upon theſe circumſtances, I think it is plain from the nature of the thing, that the immediate intention of plays is to pleaſe, whatever effects may be pretended to flow afterwards, or by accident, from this pleaſure. They conſiſt in an exact imitation of nature, and the conformity of the perſonated to

* *Plut. de Glor. Athen. & Sympoſ.* lib. 7. queſt. 8. 'As for the new comedy, it is ſo neceſſary an ingredient of all publick entertainments, that ſo to ſpeak, one may as well make a feaſt without wine, as without Menander.'

† Shaftſbury.

to real characters. This is the great aim, and the great perfection, both of the poet and actors. Now this imitation, of itſelf, gives great pleaſure to the ſpectator, whether the actions repreſented are good or bad. And, in itſelf conſidered, it gives only pleaſure; for the beauty of the imitation, as ſuch, hath no moral influence, nor any connection with morality, but what it may derive in a diſtant way from the nature of the actions which the poet or actors chooſe to repreſent, or the ſpectators are willing to ſee. Every perſon who thinks impartially, may be from this convinced, that to pleaſe, or attempt to do ſo, is eſſential to the ſtage, and its firſt, or rather its main deſign; how far it pollutes or purifies is accidental, and muſt depend upon the ſkill and honeſty of its regulators and managers.

Having thus prepared the way, the following arguments are humbly offered to the conſideration of every ſerious perſon, to ſhew, that a public theatre is inconſiſtent with the purity of the Chriſtian profeſſion: which if they do not, to all, appear to be each of them ſingly concluſive, will, I hope, when taken together, ſufficiently evince the truth of the propoſition.

In the firſt place, If it be conſidered as an amuſement, it is improper, and not ſuch as any Chriſtian may lawfully uſe. Here we muſt begin by laying it down as a fundamental principle, that all men are bound ſupremely to love, and habitually to ſerve God; that is to ſay, to take his law as the rule, and his glory as the end, not of one, but of all their actions. No man, at any time or place is, or can be, abſolved from this obligation. Every real Chriſtian lives under a habitual ſenſe of it. I know this expreſſion, aiming at the glory of God, is called a cant phraſe and is deſpiſed and derided by worldly men. It were eaſy, however, to vindicate it from reaſon; but it will ſuffice, to all thoſe for whoſe uſe that diſcourſe is intended, to ſay, It is a truth taught and repeated in the ſacred oracles, that all things were made for, that all things ſhall finally tend to, and therefore, that all

all intelligent creatures ſhould ſupremely and uniformly aim at the glory of God.

Now we glorify God by cultivating holy diſpoſitions, and doing pious and uſeful actions. Recreation is an intermiſſion of duty, and is only neceſſary becauſe of our weakneſs; it muſt be ſome action indifferent in its nature, which becomes lawful and uſefull from its tendency to refreſh the mind, and invigorate it for duties of more importance. The uſe of recreation is preciſely the ſame as the uſe of ſleep; though they differ in this, that there is but one way in which ſleep becomes ſinful, *viz.* by excels, whereas there are ten thouſand ways in which recreations become ſinful. It is needleſs to addtuce paſſages of Scripture to verify the above aſſertion concerning our obligation to glorify God. It is the language of the whole, and is particularly applied to indifferent actions by the apoſtle Paul, *Whether therefore ye eat or drink, or whatſoever ye do, do all to the glory of God* *.

If there were upon the minds of men, in general, a juſt ſenſe of this their obligation, ſtage-plays, nay, and a thouſand other amuſements now in uſe, would never have been heard of. The truth is, the need of amuſement is much leſs than people commonly apprehend, and, where it is not neceſſary, it muſt be ſinful. Thoſe who ſtand in need of recreation may be divided into two ſorts, ſuch as are employed in bodily labour, and ſuch as have their ſpirits often exhauſted by ſtudy and application of mind. As to the firſt of theſe, a mere ceſſation from labour is ſufficient for refreſhment, and indeed of itſelf gives great pleaſure, unleſs when the appetites are inflamed and irritated by frequent ſenſual gratifications; and then they are importunately craved, and become neceſſary to fill the intervals of work. Of this ſort very few are able to afford ſo expenſive a recreation as the ſtage. And even as to the other, *viz.* thoſe whoſe ſpirits are exhauſted by application of mind, only a very ſmall number of them will chuſe the diverſion of the ſtage, for this very good reaſon, that ſocial converſe, and bodily exerciſe will

* 1 Cor. 10. 31.

will anſwer the purpoſe much better. Indeed, if we conſider the juſt and legitimate end of recreations, and compare it with the perſons who moſt frequently engage in them, we ſhall find, that, ninety nine of every hundred, are ſuch as do not need recreation at all. Perhaps their time lies heavy upon their hands, and they feel an uneaſineſs and impatience under their preſent ſtate; but this is not from work, but from idleneſs, and from the emptineſs and unſatisfying nature of the enjoyments, which they chaſe with ſo much eagerneſs, one after another, vainly ſeeking from them that good which they do not contain, and that ſatisfaction which they cannot impart.

From this I think it undeniably appears, that, if no body were to attend the ſtage, but ſuch as really needed recreation or amuſement upon Chriſtian principles, and of theſe ſuch only as were able to pay for it, and of theſe only ſuch as did themſelves chooſe it, there is not a place this day, in the world, ſo large as to afford a daily audience. It will be immediately objected, This argument, make as much of it as you pleaſe, is not compleat, for it hinders not but that ſome, however few, may attend in a proper manner, and with warrantable views. But let it be remembered, that I attack not a play ſingly as a play, nor one perſon for being witneſs to a thing of that nature, but the ſtage as a ſyſtem containing all the branches I have enumerated above. This cannot ſubſiſt without a full audience, and frequent attendance, and therefore is, by its conſtitution, a conſtant and powerful invitation to ſin, and cannot be maintained but by the commiſſion of it. Perhaps, ſome will ſtill object, that the argument is too finely ſpun, that it ſeems to demand perfection, and to find fault with every practice, in which there is a probability that ſin will be committed. That, if this holds, we ſhould no more contribute to the eſtabliſhment of churches than play-houſes, becauſe we have a moral certainty, that no congregation ever will meet together on earth, but much ſin will be committed, both by miniſter and people.

people. But there is a great difference between a commanded duty which is attended with ſin by defect, and what is no where commanded, which neceſſarily invites to ſin by its nature, and is in ſubſtance ſinful to the great majority of thoſe who attend it.

But further, the ſtage is an improper, that is to ſay, an unlawful recreation to all without exception, becauſe it conſumes too much time. This is a circumſtance which, however little impreſſion it may make upon thoſe who find their time often a burden, will appear of the greateſt moment to every ſerious Chriſtian. In proportion as any man improves in holineſs of heart, he increaſes in uſefulneſs of life, and acquires a deeper and ſtronger ſenſe of the worth and value of time. To ſpend an hour unprofitably appears to ſuch a perſon a greater crime, than to many the commiſſion of groſs ſin. And, indeed, it ought to appear very heinous in the eyes of thoſe who believe the repreſentation given by our Lord Jeſus Chriſt of his own procedure at the day of judgment, *Caſt ye the* UNPROFITABLE *ſervant into utter darkneſs, where there ſhall be weeping and wailing, and gnaſhing of teeth* *. Mark this, ye lovers of pleaſures, ye ſons of gaiety and mirth, who imagine you are ſent into the world for no higher end than your own entertainment, and who, if you are free from, or able any how to palliate your groſſer ſins, never once reflect on the heavy account againſt you of waſted time.

Though there were no other objection againſt the ſtage as a recreation but this one, it is ſurely faulty. If recreations are only lawful becauſe neceſſary, they muſt ceaſe to be lawful when they are no longer neceſſary. The length and duration of regular comedy and tragedy is already fixed and ſettled by rules of long ſtanding; and, I ſuppoſe, whatever other circumſtance may be confeſſed to need reformation, all men of taſte will agree, that theſe ſhall continue as they are. Now I leave to all who know how much time the preparation for ſuch a public ap-

 pearance,

* Matth. xxv. 30.

pearance, and the neceſſary attendance, muſt take up, to judge, whether it is not too much to be given to meer recreation.

This holds particularly in the caſe of recreation of mind, between which and bodily exerciſe there is a very great difference. For bodily exerciſe, in ſome caſes, for example, when the health requires it, may be continued for a long time, only for this reaſon, that it may have effects laſting in proportion to the time ſpent in it. But giving the mind to pleaſure by way of recreation muſt be ſhort, or it is certainly hurtful; it gives men a habit of idleneſs and trifling, and makes them averſe from returning to any thing that requires ſerious application. So true is this, and ſo applicable to the preſent caſe, that I could almoſt reſt the whole argument upon it, that no man, who has made the trial, can deliberately and with a good conſcience affirm, that attending plays has added ſtrength to his mind, and warmth to his affections, in the duties of devotion; that it has made him more able and willing to exert his intellectual powers in the graver and more important offices of the Chriſtian life; nay, or even made him more diligent and active in the buſineſs of civil life. On the contrary, it is commonly to ſuch length as to produce a ſatiety and wearineſs of itſelf, and to require reſt and refreſhment to recruit the exhauſted ſpirits, a thing quite abſurd and ſelf-contradictory in what is called a recreation.

But the ſtage is not meerly an unprofitable conſumption of time, it is further improper as a recreation, becauſe it agitates the paſſions too violently, and intereſts too deeply, ſo as, in ſome caſes, to bring people into a real, while they behold an imaginary diſtreſs. Keeping in view the end of recreations, will enable us to judge rightly of this. It is to refreſh and invigorate the mind. Therefore when, inſtead of reſt, which is properly called relaxation of mind, recreations are uſed, their excellence conſiſts in their being, not only a pleaſant, but an eaſy exerciſe of the intellectual powers. Whatever is difficult, and either requires or cauſes a ſtrong application of mind, is con-

contrary to their intention. Now it is plain, that dramatick repreſentations fix the attention ſo very deeply, and intereſt the affections ſo very ſtrongly, that, in a little time, they fatigue the mind themſelves, and however eagerly they are deſired and followed, there are many ſerious and uſeful occupations, in which men will continue longer, without exhauſting the ſpirits, than in attending the theatre.

Indeed, in this reſpect, they are wholly contrary to what ſhould be the view of every Chriſtian. He ought to ſet bounds to, and endeavour to moderate his paſſions, as much as poſſible, inſtead of voluntarily and unneceſſarily exciting them. The human paſſions, ſince the fall, are all of them but too ſtrong; and are not ſinful on account of their weakneſs, but their exceſs and miſapplication. This is ſo generally true, that it hardly admits of an exception; unleſs it might be counted an exception, that ſome vitious paſſions, when they gain an aſcendancy, extinguiſh others which oppoſe their gratification. For, though religion is conſiſtent throughout, there are many vices, which are mutually repugnant to, and deſtructive of each other. But this exception has little or no effect upon the preſent argument.

Now, the great care of every Chriſtian is to keep his paſſions and affections within due bounds, and to direct them to their proper objects. With reſpect to the firſt of theſe, the chief influence of theatrical repreſentations upon the ſpectator, is to ſtrengthen the paſſions by indulgence, for there they are all exhibited in a lively manner, and ſuch as is moſt fit to communicate the impreſſion. As to directing them to their proper objects, it will be afterwards ſhown, that the ſtage has rather the contrary effect, in the mean time, it is ſufficient to obſerve, that it may be done much more effectually, and much more ſafely, another way.

This tendency of plays to intereſt the affections, ſhows their impropriety as a recreation on another account. It ſhows that

they muſt be exceeding liable to abuſe by exceſs, even ſuppoſing them in a certain degree, to be innocent. It is certain there is no life more unworthy of a man, hardly any more criminal in a Chriſtian, than a life of perpetual amuſement, a life where no valuable purpoſe is purſued, but the intellectual faculties wholly employed in purchaſing and indulging ſenſual gratifications. It is alſo certain, that all of us are by nature, too much inclined thus to live to ourſelves, and not to God. Therefore, where recreations are neceſſary, a watchful Chriſtian will particularly beware of thoſe that are enſnaring, and, by being too grateful and delicious, ready to lead to exceſs. This diſcriminating care and caution, is juſt as much the duty of a Chriſtian, as any that can be named. Tho' it is immediately converſant only about the temptations and incitements to ſin, and not the actual commiſſion of it, it becomes a duty directly binding, both from the command of God, and the neceſſity of the thing itſelf. *Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation* *, ſays our Saviour to his diſciples; and elſewhere, *What I ſay unto you, I ſay unto all, Watch* †. And the apoſtle Paul to the ſame purpoſe, *See then that ye walk circumſpectly, not as fools, but as wiſe, redeeming the time becauſe the days are evil* ‡.

And if we conſider the light in which the ſcripture ſets our preſent ſituation, and the account there given of the weakneſs of human reſolution, the ſame thing will evidently appear to be our duty. It is impoſſible that we can reſiſt the ſlighteſt temptation, but by the aſiſtance of divine grace. Now, how can this be expected if we put our conſtancy to unneceſſary trials, not only contrary to reaſon, and a prudent regard to our own ſafety, but in the face of an expreſs command of God to be watchfull. *Lord, lead us not into temptation*, is a petition, which we are taught to offer up, by him who knew what was in man. But how much do thoſe act in oppoſition to this, and even in contempt of it, who make temptations to themſelves. And are not

* Matth. xxvi. 41. † Mark xiii. 37. ‡ Eph. v. 15.

not ſtage-plays temptations of the ſtrongeſt kind, in which the mind is ſoftened with pleaſure, and the affections powerfully excited? How little reaſon is there to hope that men in the uſe of them will keep within the bounds of moderation? If any expect, in ſuch circumſtances, to be preſerved by divine power, they are guilty of the ſin, which is in ſcripture called *tempting God*.

It is this very circumſtance, a liableneſs to abuſe by exceſs, that renders many other amuſements alſo ordinarily unlawful to Chriſtians, tho' perhaps, in their general nature, they cannot be ſhown to be criminal. Thus, it is not eaſy to refute the reaſonings, by which ingenious men endeavour to ſhow that games of hazard are not in themſelves ſinful; but by their enticing, enſnaring nature, and the exceſs which almoſt inſeparably accompanies them, there can be no difficulty in pronouncing them highly dangerous, lawful to very few perſons, and in very few caſes. And, if they were as publick in their nature as plays, if they required the concurrence of as many operators, and as great a number of perſons to join in them, I could have little ſcruple in affirming, that, in every poſſible caſe, they would be ſinful.

The preceeding conſiderations are greatly confirmed by the following, That when plays are choſen as a recreation, for which they are ſo exceedingly improper, it is always in oppoſition to other methods of recreation, which are perfectly fit for the purpoſe, and not liable to any of theſe objections. Where recreations are neceſſary, if there were only one ſort to be had, ſome inconveniences could not be ſo ſtrong an argument againſt the uſe of them. But where there are diſferent kinds, to prefer thoſe which are leſs, to thoſe which are more fit, muſt needs be ſinful. Such a tenderneſs and circumſpection is, indeed, in this age, ſo rare and unuſual, that, I am affraid, it will be almoſt impoſſible to fix a ſenſe of its importance upon the mind of the reader; or, if it be done in any meaſure for a time, the example of a corrupt world, who are altogether

gether void of it, will immediately efface the impreſſion. But, however few may *have ears to hear it*, the thing is certain, that, as the progreſs of his ſanctification is the ſupreme deſire and care of every Chriſtian, ſo he is continually liable to be ſeduced by temptation, and infected by example; and, therefore, from a diſtruſt of his own reſolution, will not voluntarily and unneceſſarily prefer a dangerous to a ſafe amuſement. To prefer a very difficult and doubtful mean of attaining any worldly end, to one ſure and eaſy; to prefer a clumſy improper inſtrument, to one perfectly fit for any piece of work, would be reckoned no ſmall evidence of folly in the affairs of civil life. If one in ſickneſs ſhould chooſe a medicine of a very queſtionable nature, of very dangerous and uncertain operation, when he had equal acceſs to one entirely ſafe, of approved reputation, and ſuperior efficacy, it would be eſteemed next to madneſs. Is there not then a real conformity between the caſes? Is not a like care to be taken of our ſouls as of our bodies? Nay, is not the obligation ſo much the ſtronger, by how much the one is of greater value than the other? The different conduct of men and their different fate, in this reſpect, is well deſcribed by the wiſe man, *Happy is the man that feareth alway, but he that hardeneth his heart ſhall fall into miſchief* *.

It ought not to be omitted in ſhewing the impropriety of the ſtage as a recreation and amuſement for Chriſtians, that it is coſtly and expenſive, and that this coſt is altogether unneceſſary, ſince the end might be obtained, not only as well, but much better, at a far cheaper rate, perhaps, in moſt caſes, at no expence at all. I know this argument will be treated with great contempt by thoſe who live in affluence, and know no other uſe of riches but to feed their appetites, and make all the reſt of mankind ſubſervient to the gratification of their violent and ungovernable deſires. But tho' none in this world have any title to hinder them from diſpoſing of their wealth as they pleaſe, they muſt be called

* Prov. xxviii. 14.

called to conſider, that they have a maſter in heaven. To him they muſt render an account at the laſt day, and, in this account, the uſe that they make of their riches is not to be excepted. The great have, no doubt, the diſtinguiſhed honour, if they pleaſe to embrace it, of contributing to the happineſs of multitudes under them, and diſpenſing, under God, a great variety of the comforts of this life. But it would abate the envy and impatience of the lower part of the world, and moderate their appetite after riches, if they would conſider, that the more that is committed to them, the more they have to account for. The greateſt and richeſt man on earth hath not any licence, in the word of God, for an unneceſſary waſte of his ſubſtance, or conſuming it in unprofitable and hurtful pleaſures; and, under the one or both of theſe characters, that muſt fall, that is laid out upon the ſtage.

Let not any reader, who cannot find a ſatisfying anſwer to theſe objections againſt the ſtage as an unchriſtian amuſement, from the word of God, take the practice of the world as a refuge or ſanctuary, and ſay, This is carrying matters to an extreme, if theſe maxims are rigidly adhered to, you will exclude from the number of Chriſtians, not only the far greateſt part of mankind, but many otherwiſe of excellent and amiable characters. Tho' this is the weakeſt of all arguments, it is, perhaps, that which hath of all others the ſtrongeſt effect, and moſt powerfully contributes to ſet peoples mind at eaſe in a doubtful or dangerous practice. How hard is it to make men ſenſible of the evil of ſuch ſins, as cuſtom authorizes and faſhion juſtifies? There is no making them aſhamed of them, becauſe they are common and reputable, and there is no making them affraid of what they ſee done without ſuſpicion by numbers on every hand. But is there any reaſon to believe, that the example of others will prove a juſt and valid excuſe for any practice at the judgment-ſeat of Chriſt? Will the greatneſs or the number of offenders ſcreen them from his power? Or can that man expect a

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gracious acceptance with him, who has ſuffered his commands to be qualified by prevailing opinion, and would not follow him farther than the bulk of mankind would bear him company.

I ſhall cloſe the reflections upon this part of the ſubject by obſerving, that there are two general characters of the diſciples of Chriſt, which will appear, if we conſult the ſcriptures, to be eſſential to them, and which ſeem altogether inconſiſtent with theatrical amuſements. The firſt is ſelf-denial and mortification. Tho' we ſhould not inſiſt upon the particular objections againſt the ſtage, there is ſomething of pomp and gaiety in it, upon the beſt poſſible ſuppoſition, that is inconſiſtent with the character of a Chriſtian. The goſpel is the religion of ſinners, who are ſaved from wrath by the rich mercy and free grace of God. The life of ſuch, then, muſt be a life of penitence, humility, and mortification. The followers of a crucified Saviour muſt bear the croſs, and tread in the ſame path of ſuffering and ſelf-denial, in which he hath gone before them. In their baptiſmal covenant they renounce the world, by which is not meant ſuch groſs crimes as are a violation of natural light, as well as a tranſgreſſion of the law of God, but that exceſſive attachment to preſent indulgence, which is more properly expreſſed by the pomp and vanity of the world *. It is true there are many precepts in Scripture

* It is not improper here to conſider the ancient form of baptiſm, and what was ſuppoſed by the fathers to be implied in it, *Apoſt. Conſtitut.* lib. 7. cap. 41. αποτασσομαι τω σατανα, *&c.* 'I renounce Satan and his works, and his 'pomps, and his ſervice, and his angels, and his inventions, and all things 'that belong to him, or are ſubject to him.' *Ambroſ. de Initiatis. Ingreſſus es regenerationis ſacrarium*, &c. 'Thou haſt entered into the holy place of 'regeneration; repeat what you were there aſked, and recollect what you 'anſwered? You renounced the devil, and his works, and his world, and 'his luxury and pleaſures. *Hieron. Com. in Matth.* xv. 26. *Renuntio tibi diabole*, &c. 'I renounce thee Satan, and thy pomp, and thy vices, and 'thy world, which lieth in wickedneſs.' And that we may know what they had particularly in view by the pomps of the world which they renounced, they are ſometimes expreſly ſaid to be the public ſhews. Thus Salvian. *de provi-*

Scripture which require us to maintain a habitual gratitude and thankful frame of ſpirit, nay, to rejoice in the Lord alway. But there is a great difference between this joy, and that of worldly men; as they do not riſe from the ſame ſource, ſo they cannot poſſibly expreſs themſelves in the ſame way.

Another branch of the Chriſtian temper, between which, and theatrical amuſements, there appears a very great oppoſition, is ſpirituality and heavenlineſs of mind. All real Chriſtians are, and account themſelves pilgrims and ſtrangers on the earth, ſet their affections on things above, and have their converſation in heaven. Whatever tends to weaken theſe diſpoſitions they will carefully avoid as contrary to their duty and their intereſt. Is not this the caſe with theatrical amuſements? Are they not very delicious to a ſenſual and carnal mind. Do they not excite, gratify and ſtrengthen theſe affections, which it is moſt the buſineſs of a Chriſtian to reſtrain? Are not the indulgence of worldly pleaſure, and heavenlineſs of mind, mutually deſtructive of each other? This is ſo plain, that anciently thoſe who gave themſelves up to a life of eminent holineſs and piety, uſed to retire wholly from the commerce of the world and the ſociety of men. Tho' this was wrong in itſelf, and ſoon found to be very liable to ſuperſtitious abuſe, it plainly ſhows how much they err upon the oppoſite ſide, who being called to wean their affections from the

provident. lib. 6. page 197. *Quæ eſt enim in baptiſmo*, &c. 'For what is the 'firſt profeſſion of a Chriſtian in baptiſm? What, but that they profeſs to 'renounce the devil, and his pomps, his ſhows, and his works. Therefore 'ſhows and pomps, by our own confeſſion, are the works of the devil. How, 'O Chriſtian, wilt thou follow the public ſhows after baptiſm, which thou 'confeſſeſt to be the works of the devil?'

There are ſome that pretend, that Chriſtians were only kept from the ſhows, becauſe they were mixed with idolatrous rites: But it is to be noted, that in the time of Salvian idolatry was aboliſhed, and the ſhows were no longer exhibited in honour of Idol Gods. Cyril of Jeruſalem alſo, after idolatry was deſtroyed, continues the charge againſt the ſhows.

the world, do yet voluntarily and unneceſſarily indulge themſelves in the moſt delicious and intoxicating pleaſures.

What is offered above, I hope, will ſuffice to ſhow that the ſtage, conſidered ſimply as an entertainment, cannot be lawfully uſed by a Chriſtian. But we muſt now proceed in the ſecond place, To conſider the modern pretence, that it is uſeful and inſtructive, or to ſpeak in the language of one of its defenders, 'A warm incentive to virtue, and powerful preſervative againſt 'vice *.' The ſame author gives us this account of tragedy, 'True tragedy is a ſerious lecture upon our duty, ſhorter than 'an epick poem, and longer than a fable, otherwiſe differing 'from both only in the method, which is dialogue inſtead of 'narration; its province is to bring us in love with the more 'exalted virtues, and to create a deteſtation of the blacker and '(humanly ſpeaking) more enormous crimes,' On comedy he ſays, 'an inſinuating mirth laughs us out of our frailties by mak-'ing us aſhamed of them. Thus, when they are well intended, 'tragedy and comedy work to one purpoſe, the one manages 'us as children, the other convinces us as men.' In order to treat this part of the ſubject with preciſion, I muſt beg the reader to recal to mind the account formerly given of what is implied in the ſtage, even under the beſt poſſible regulation; becauſe unleſs this be allowed me, I confeſs the argument to be defective. It is not denied, that there may be, and are to be found, in ſome dramatick performances, noble and excellent ſentiments. Theſe, indeed, are much fewer than is commonly ſuppoſed, as might be ſhown by an examination of ſome of the moſt celebrated plays. There is a great difference between the ſhining thoughts that are applauded in the world by men of taſte, and the ſolid and profitable truths of religion. However it is allowed, that there are ſome things to be found in plays, againſt which no juſt objection can be made; and it is eaſy to form an idea

* Remarks on Anderſon's Poſitions concerning the unlawfulneſs of ſtage-plays.

idea of them ſtill more pure than any that do yet exiſt; but the queſtion is, Whether it is poſſible now to find, or reaſonable to hope to find, ſuch a number of pieces, in their prevailing tendency, agreeable to the holineſs and purity of the Chriſtian character, as are neceſſary to ſupport a publick theatre. Till this is accompliſhed, all that is done to ſupport the theatre in the mean time, is done to ſupport the intereſt of vice and wickedneſs; whatever it may be in itſelf and ſingly conſidered. And if ſuch an entire reformation be impoſſible, a partial reformation, or mixing a few good things with it, is not only ineffectual but hurtful. It makes a bad cauſe a little more plauſible, and therefore the temptation ſo much the more formidable.

There is a diſcourſe of a foreigner of ſome note, in which he exerts all his eloquence in commendation of plays, when uſed in the public ſchools, for the improvement of youth in action and elocution, under the direction of their maſters. As this gentleman was a clergyman, his authority is often uſed on this ſubject. But it ought to be obſerved, that as he was a young man when he employed his eloquence in this cauſe, ſo, what he ſays, ſtrongly ſupports the propriety of the diſtinction I have laid down. He expreſly confines the argument to ſuch plays as were repreſented by youth in the ſchools, and rejects with great abhorrence the public ſtage, and ſuch as were acted by mercenary players. Of the laſt ſort he hath the following ſtrong words. *At hic vereor A. ne qui ſint inter vos qui ex me quaerant: Quid agis adoleſcens? Tunc comoedos, Hiſtriones, mimos, ex eloquentiae ſtudioſis facere paras? Egone? Hiſtriones? Quos? An viles illos qui in ſcenam prodeunt mercede conducti? Qui quaeſtus cauſa quamlibet perſonam induant? qui paſſim per urbes vagantes artem ſuam venalem habent? Qui, merito, Romano jure, infamia notantur? —— Abſit a me abſit, ut in hac impietatis ſchola teneros adoleſcentium animos eloquentia imbui velim. Quanticunque eam facio, tanti tamen non eſt. Satius eſſet balbutire, imo ſatius mutum eſſe, quam non ſine ſummo animi peri-*

culo eloquentiam discere *. Which passage may be translated thus, 'But here I am affraid some of you will be ready to challenge me, and to say, what is this you aim at young man? Do you intend to make all who study eloquence comedians, players, buffoons? Do I indeed? What sort of players? Those contemptible wretches, who are hired to come upon the stage, and who for gain will personate any character whatever? Who go about through different cities making merchandise of their art? Who are justly marked with infamy in the Roman law? —— Far, far be it from me to propose, that the tender minds of youth should be taught eloquence in this school of impiety. However much I value it, I value it not at this rate. Better it were they should stammer in speech, nay, better that they were dumb and incapable of speech, than that they should learn the art of eloquence, by putting their souls in the most imminent danger.' Now, whether this author's scheme was right or not, I have no occasion at present to debate with him as an adversary, for he rejects with abhorrence the imputation of favouring the cause against which I plead.

When a public theatre is defended as a mean of instruction, I cannot help thinking it is of importance to observe, that it is a method altogether uncommanded and unauthorized in the word of God. This will probably appear a very weak argument to many, but it will not appear so to those who have a firm belief of, and a just esteem for that book of life. Such will not expect, that any method will prove effectual to make men *wise unto salvation* without the blessing of God, and they will hardly be induced to look for his blessing upon the stage. And let it be remembred, that it is now pled for in a higher light, and on a more important account than merely as an amusement, *viz.* as proper to support the interest of religion; it should therefore have a positive warrant before it be employed in this cause, lest it should meet with the same reception that all other human devices

* Werenfels Oratio de Comœdiis.

devices will meet with, *Who hath required theſe things at your hands?*

And that none may uſe a deluſory ſort of reaſoning, and ſhift from one pretence to another, ſaying, it becomes a lawful amuſement by its tendency to inſtruct, and an effectual inſtruction by its power to pleaſe at the ſame time; it muſt be obſerved, that a ſinful amuſement is not to be indulged on any pretence whatſoever, for we muſt not *do evil that good may come.* Nay, call it only a dangerous amuſement, even in that caſe, no pretence of poſſible or probable inſtruction, (tho' ſuch a thing were not contrary to the ſuppoſition) is ſufficient to warrant it. Nothing leſs than its being neceſſary could authoriſe the practice, and that I hope none will be ſo hardy as to affirm.

It can never be affirmed to be neceſſary, without a blaſphemous impeachment of the divine wiſdom. If the holy ſcriptures, and the methods there authoriſed and appointed, are full and ſufficient for our ſpiritual improvement, all others muſt be wholly unneceſſary. And if they are the moſt powerful and the moſt effectual means, no others muſt be ſuffered to come into rivalſhip and competition with them; on the contrary, they muſt be condemned as wrong, or laid aſide as comparatively weak. The truth is, the ſtage can never be defended on a more untenable footing, than when it is repreſented as having a moral or virtuous, that is to ſay, a pious or religious tendency. What Chriſtian can hear ſuch a plea with patience? Is the *law of the Lord perfect, converting the ſoul? Is it able to make the man of God perfect, throughly furniſhed to every good work?* What then are its defects which muſt be ſupplied by the theatre? Have the ſaints of God, for ſo many ages, been carried ſafely through all the dark and difficult ſteps of their earthly pilgrimage, with his law as a *light to their feet, and a lamp to their path,* and yet is it now neceſſary, that they ſhould have additional illumination from a well-regulated ſtage? Have there

there been for ſo long a time paſtors employed bearing a divine commiſſion? ordinances adminiſtred according to divine inſtitution? Have theſe been hitherto effectual for *perfecting the ſaints, for the work of the miniſtry, and for edifying the body of Chriſt?* And ſhall we not count them among the ſcoffers that were to come in the laſt days, who pretend to open up a new commiſſion for the players to aſſiſt. If any ſhall ſay there needs no divine inſtitution, all men are called to inſtruct one another, *the lips of the righteous ſhould feed many*, and this way of the drama is but a mode of the inſtruction we all owe to one another. I anſwer, it is as a mode I attack it. This very mode has been ſhown to be dangerous, nay ſinful, as an amuſement; who then can ſhew its neceſſity, in the ſame mode, for inſtruction or improvement.

If the ſtage be a proper method of promoting the intereſts of religion, then is Satan's kingdom divided againſt itſelf, which he is more cunning than to ſuffer it to be. For, whatever debate there be, whether good men *may* attend the theatre, there can be no queſtion at all, that no openly vicious man is an enemy to it, and that the far greateſt part of them do paſſionately love it. I ſay no *openly* vitious man, for, doubtleſs, there may be ſome hypocrites wearing the habit of the Chriſtian pilgrim, who are the very worſt of men, and yet may ſhew abundance of zeal againſt the ſtage. But nothing is more certain, than that, taking the world according to its appearance, it is the worſt part of it that ſhews moſt paſſion for this entertainment, and the beſt that avoids and fears it, than which there can hardly be a worſe ſign of it, as a mean of doing good. Whoever believes the following words of our bleſſed Redeemer, will never be perſuaded that poets and actors for the ſtage have received any commiſſion to ſpeak in his name. *My ſheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me* *.—*A ſtranger will*

* John x. 27.

will they not follow, but will flee from him, for they know not the voice of ſtrangers †. ‡

This leads us to obſerve, that the ſtage is not only an improper method of inſtruction, but that all, or the far greateſt number of pieces there repreſented, muſt have, upon the whole, a pernicious tendency. This is evident, becauſe they muſt be to the taſte and reliſh of the bulk of thoſe who attend it. The difficulty of getting good authors for the theatre, I ſhall not inſiſt upon, but whatever the authors are able or willing to do, it is certain, that their productions in fact, can riſe no higher in point of purity, than the audience ſhall be willing to receive. Their attendance is not conſtrained, but voluntary; nay, they pay dearly for their entertainment; and therefore they muſt, and will have it to their taſte. This is a part of the ſubject that merits the particular attention of all who are inclined to judge impartially, and it proves, in the ſtrongeſt manner, the abſurdity of forming chimerical ſuppoſitions of a ſtage ſo regulated, as, inſtead of being hurtful, to promote the intereſts of piety and virtue.

Here

† John x. 5.

‡ It is to be obſerved here, to prevent miſtakes, that the argument is founded on the general and prevailing inclination of the greateſt part of each character, and not upon particular inſtances, in many of which, it is confeſſed, it will not hold. For, as it is difficult to know the real character of ſome perſons, in whom there are ſome marks and ſigns of true religion, and at the ſame time, ſome ſymptoms of unſoundneſs, ſo, it is ſtill more difficult to determine the quality of ſingle actions. Therefore, it is little or no argument that any practice is ſafe or good, becauſe one good man, or one ſuppoſed to be good, has been known to do it; or on the contrary, ill, becauſe one bad man has been known to do it. But as, when we retire further from the limit that divides them, the characters are more clearly and ſenſibly diſtinguiſhed, ſo, whatever practice is paſſionately deſired by wicked men in general, and ſhunned by the good, certainly is of bad tendency. If it were otherwiſe, as ſaid above, Satan's kingdom would be *divided againſt itſelf*, and the God *who keepeth covenant and truth for ever*, would fail in his promiſe, of *giving* his people *counſel*, and *teaching them the way in which they ought to walk*.

Here let ſome truths be called to mind which are frequently mentioned in the holy ſcriptures, but ſeldom recollected, and their conſequences very little attended to. There is a diſtinction often ſtated, both in the Old and New Teſtament, between the children of God and the men of the world. Theſe are mixed together in the preſent ſtate, and cannot, in many caſes, be certainly diſtinguiſhed by their outward appearance; yet is there at bottom, not only a real diſtinction of character, but a perfect oppoſition between them, as to the commanding principle of all their actions. And as there is an oppoſition of character between them, ſo there muſt be an oppoſition of intereſts and views. Our bleſſed Redeemer when he came into the world, was *deſpiſed and rejected of men*; and he every where tells his diſciples, that they muſt expect no better treatment. *Bleſſed are ye when men ſhall revile you, and perſecute you, and ſhall ſay all manner of evil againſt you falſely, for my ſake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven; for ſo perſecuted they the prophets that were before you* *. And on the other hand, *Wo unto you when all men ſhall ſpeak well of you, for ſo did their fathers to the falſe prophets* †. Again, *If ye were of the world, the world would love his own; but becauſe ye are not of the world, but I have choſen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you* ‡. His apoſtles ſpeak always the ſame language: Thus the apoſtle Paul, *And be not conformed to this world* §. Nay, he lays it down as an univerſal poſition, *Yea, and all that will live godly in Chriſt Jeſus ſhall ſuffer perſecution* ‖. Now I aſk, Whether thoſe who have a ſtrong and rooted averſion at true holineſs, which is the character of the ſincere Chriſtian, will voluntarily croud to the theatre, to hear and ſee ſuch performances as breathe nothing but what is agreeable to the pure uncorrupted word of God? Will thoſe who revile, injure, and perſecute the ſaints themſelves,

* Mat. v. 11, 12. † Luke vi. 26. ‡ John xv. 19. § Rom. xii. 2.
‖ 2 Tim. 3. 12.

ſelves, delight in the ſtage, if honour is there put upon true religion, and be pleaſed with that character in the repreſentation which they hate in the original? This would be to expect impoſſibilities. And therefore, while the great majority of thoſe who attend the ſtage are unholy, it is certain, that the plays which they behold with pleaſure cannot, upon the whole, but have a criminal tendency.

If any allege, that the poets art may be a mean to make religion amiable to them, I anſwer, that he cannot make it amiable, but by adulteration, by mixing it with ſomething agreeable to their own taſte, and then it is not religion that they admire, but the erroneous, debaſed and falſe reſemblance of it. Or even ſuppoſing, that, in a ſingle inſtance or two, nothing in ſubſtance ſhould be ſet before them but true religion, and this dreſſed to the very higheſt advantage by the poet's genius and actor's ſkill, there would be little gained; becauſe theſe human arts only, would be the object of their admiration, and they would always prefer, and ſpeedily procure, a diſplay of the ſame arts, upon a ſubject more agreeable to their corrupt minds. This, indeed, we are not left to gather by way of inference and deduction from other truths, but are expreſly taught it in the word of God. For *the natural man receiveth not the things of the ſpirit of God: for they are fooliſhneſs unto him, neither can he know them, becauſe they are ſpiritually diſcerned**. Experience is a ſtrong proof of this; for if any man will take the pains of making up a ſyſtem of the morality of the ſtage, I do not mean the horrid prophanity and ſcandalous obſcenity that is to be found in the worſt, but of that which is called virtue in the beſt of the pieces wrote for the theatre, he will find it exceeding different from Chriſtian morals; and, that an adherence to it would be, in moſt inſtances, a wilful departure from the rules of a holy life.

However plainly this is founded upon the word of God and

* 1 Cor. ii. 14.

ſound reaſon, there are ſome very unwilling to think, that ever their duty as Chriſtians ſhould conſtrain them to be at odds with the delicacies of life, or the polite and faſhionable pleaſures of the age. And, as the mind of man is very ingenious in the defence of that pollution which it loves, they ſometimes bring in criticiſm to their aid. They alledge that by the *world* is underſtood, generally thro' the New Teſtament, thoſe who were Heathens by profeſſion; and that the ſame oppoſition to true religion, in judgment and heart, is not to be aſcribed to thoſe who are members of the viſible church. It is anſwered, the word did indeed ſignify as they ſay, for this plain reaſon, that in the early days of Chriſtianity, when it was under perſecution, few or none would make profeſſion of it unleſs they did really believe it. But is not the meaning ſtill the ſame? Can we ſuppoſe that the hatred of the then world was at the name of religion only, and not at the ſubſtance? Was the devil *the prince of this world*, then? And has he not now equal dominion over, and is he not equally ſerved by thoſe who are profane in their lives, though they were once baptiſed? Was he the ſpirit that *then worked*, and is he not the ſpirit that *now works* in the children of diſobedience? The truth therefore remains ſtill the ſame, thoſe who are in a natural and unregenerate ſtate, who hate true religion in their hearts, muſt have ſomething very different before they can be pleaſed with ſeeing it on the ſtage*.

That

* There is an excellent paſſage to this purpoſe in an eſſay againſt plays, to be found in one of the volumes publiſhed about a hundred years ago by the gentlemen of the Portroyal in France, a ſociety of Janſeniſts, of great parts and eminent piety. This eſſay in particular, is by ſome ſaid to have been written by the prince of Conti. Section 15th of that eſſay, he ſays, 'It is ſo true that plays are almoſt always a repreſentation of vicious paſſions, that the moſt part of Chriſtian virtues are incapable of appearing upon the ſtage. Silence, patience, moderation, wiſdom, poverty, repentance, are no virtues the repreſentation of which can divert the ſpectators; and above all, we never hear humility ſpoken of, and the bearing of injuries.

'It

That this argument may have its proper force, we ought to conſider, how great a proportion of perſons under the dominion of vice and wickedneſs there muſt always be among thoſe who attend the theatre. The far greateſt number of the world in general are ungodly. This is a fact which could hardly be denied, even tho' the following paſſage had not ſtood in the oracles of truth. *Enter ye in at the ſtrait gate; for wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth to deſtruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Becauſe ſtrait is the gate, and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it* †. And as none can attend the ſtage, but thoſe in higher life, and more affluent circumſtances than the bulk of mankind, there is ſtill a greater proportion of them who are enemies to pure and undefiled religion. Thus, ſays our Saviour to his diſciples, *Verily I ſay unto you, that a rich man ſhall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I ſay unto you, it is eaſier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God* ‡. To the ſame purpoſe the apoſtle Paul ſays, *Ye ſee your calling, brethren, how that not many wiſe men after the fleſh, not many mighty, not many noble are called* ‖. This does not at all ſuppoſe, that thoſe in high life are originally more corrupt in their nature than others, but it ariſes from their being expoſed to much greater and ſtronger temptations. Now if, from the ſmall number of real Chriſtians in the upper ranks of life, we again ſubſtract ſuch as count

* It would be ſtrange to ſee a modeſt and ſilent religious perſon repreſented. There muſt be ſomething of great and renowned according to men, or at leaſt ſomething lively and animated, which is not met withal in Chriſtian gravity and wiſdom, and therefore, thoſe who have been deſirous to introduce holy men and women upon the ſtage, have been forced to make them appear proud, and to make them utter diſcourſes more proper for the ancient Roman heroes than for ſaints and martyrs. Their devotion upon the ſtage ought alſo to be always a little extraordinary.

† Mat. vii. 13, 14. ‡ Mat. xix. 23, 24. ‖ 1 Cor. i. 26.

count the ſtage unlawful or dangerous, or have no inclination to it, there will very few remain of thoſe who are *the ſalt of the earth*, to ſeaſon the unhallowed aſſembly. What ſort of productions then muſt they be, which ſhall have the approbation of ſuch judges? How much more proper to pollute than to reform, to poiſon than to cure? If ſuch in fact the great bulk of plays have always hitherto been, from what has been ſaid it ought not to be wondered at, becauſe it cannot be otherwiſe.

It is very poſſible, that ſome may be all this while holding the argument very cheap, and ſaying with lord Shaftſbury, 'The true genius is of a nobler nature than ſervilely to ſubmit 'to the corrupt or vitiated taſte of any age or place; —he works 'not for gain, but deſpiſes it;—he knows, and will not ſwerve 'from the truth of art;—he will produce what is noble and 'excellent in its kind;—he will refine the public ear, and teach 'them to admire in the right place. Theſe, tho' I do not cite any particular paſſage, are all of them ſentiments, and moſt of them expreſſions, of that author ſo much admired among modern philoſophers. But the objection is eaſily ſolved. The obſervation is allowed to be juſt, and to hold with reſpect to the poetic, oratorial, or any human art, becauſe we know of no higher ſtandard in any of theſe, than what human nature, in its preſent ſtate, will moſt admire when it is exhibited to view. Accordingly the great poet and the great orator, tho', through the prevalence of a bad taſte, they may find it difficult at firſt to procure attention, yet they will procure it at laſt: And when they are heard, they carry the prize from all inferior pretenders; and indeed, their doing ſo is the very touchſtone and trial of their art itſelf. In this caſe, there lies no appeal from the judgment of the public or the multitude, (as David Hume has ſaid for once according to truth,) to the judgment of a wiſer few.

But there cannot be any thing more abſurd than to ſuppoſe, that

that the ſame thing will hold in morals and religion. The dramatic poets in Athens, where the ſtage was firſt eſtabliſhed, improved upon one another, and refined their own taſte, and that of their audience, as to the elegance of their compoſitions. Nay, they ſoon brought tragedy, as a great critic * obſerves, to as great perfection as the nature of the thing ſeems to admit of. But whoever will from this infer, that they improved in their morals in the ſame proportion, or by that means, will fall into a very groſs miſtake. This, indeed, ſeems to be the great error of modern infidels, to ſuppoſe, that there is no more in morals than a certain taſte and ſenſe of beauty and elegance. Natural talents in the human mind are quite diſtinct from moral diſpoſitions, and the excellence of the one is no evidence at all of the prevalence of the other. On the contrary, the firſt are many times found in the higheſt perfection, where there is a total abſence of the laſt. And therefore, that true genius is the object of univerſal approbation, hinders not but that true goodneſs is the object of general averſion. The ſcripture aſſures us, that all men are by nature under the power of ſin, *that every imagination of the thoughts of man is only evil from his youth, and that continually* †. *That the carnal mind is enmity againſt God, and,* till it be renewed by divine grace, *is not ſubject to the law of God, neither indeed can be* ‡.

Now it is utterly impoſſible and ſelf-contradictory, that men ſhould approve and delight in that which is contrary to the habitual prevailing temper of their hearts; and to bring about a change in them is not in the power of any human art, but with the concurrence of the ſpirit and grace of God. In this he has given no authority to the players to act under him, nay, he has expreſly told us, that he will not ordinarily, in any way whatever, make uſe of the perfection of human art, but of the plaineſt and weakeſt outward means. Thus the apoſtle Paul tells us his Maſter ſent him, *To preach the goſpel, not with wiſdom of words, leſt*

* Ariſtotle. † Gen. vi. 5. ‡ Rom. viii. 7.

leſt the croſs of Chriſt ſhould be made of none effect *.——And, *after that in the wiſdom of God, the world by wiſdom knew not God, it pleaſed God by the fooliſhneſs of preaching to ſave them that believe* †. He alſo profeſſes that his practice had always been conformed to this rule, *And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of ſpeech or of wiſdom, declaring unto you the teſtimony of God* ‡. *And my ſpeech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wiſdom, but in demonſtration of the Spirit and of power. That your faith ſhould not ſtand in the wiſdom of men but in the power of God* ‖ §.

It may be neceſſary here, to obviate an objection, that in the holy ſcriptures themſelves we find ſeveral paſſages which ſeem to ſignify, that true religion, though it is not the choice of all men, is yet the object of univerſal aprobation. Thus we are told, that *the righteous ſhall be in everlaſting remembrance, but the memory of the wicked ſhall rot.* Nay, we are exhorted by the apoſtle Paul to the practice of our duty, in ſuch terms as theſe, *Whatſoever things are true, whatſoever things are lovely, what-*

* 1 Cor. i. 17. † Ibid ver. 21. ‡ 1 Cor. ii. 1. ‖ Ibid ver. 4, 5.

§ Perhaps ſome will aſk here, Is then human art, and are natural talents, which are the gifts of God, wholly excluded from his ſervice? I anſwer, they are not. And yet the inſtances of their being eminently uſeful are exceeding rare. Such is the imperfection of the human mind, that it can hardly at the ſame time, give great attention and application to two diſtinct ſubjects; and therefore, when men give that intenſe application to human art, which is neceſſary to bring it to its perfection, they are apt to overlook the power and grace of God, without which all art is vain and ineffectual. Agreeably to this, when men of eminent talents have been of ſervice in religion, it has been commonly by the exerciſe of ſelf-denial, by making a very ſparing and moderate uſe of them, and ſhowing themſelves ſo deeply penetrated with a ſenſe of the important truths of the everlaſting goſpel, as to deſpiſe the beauties and embelliſhments of human ſkill, too great an attention to which is evidently inconſiſtent with the other. Well, ſay refined obſervers, this is the very perfection of art to uſe it with great reſerve, and keep it out of view as much as poſſible. And it is, indeed, the perfection of art to have the appearance of this, but it is peculiar to a renewed heart to have it in reality.

whatſoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue, if there be any praiſe, think on theſe things. But theſe muſt ſurely be explained in ſuch a manner, as to be conſiſtent with the clear and ſtrong paſſages mentioned above; which is not difficult to do. The matter of many good actions, particularly ſocial virtues, the duties of the ſecond table of the law, wicked men do often approve, nay, they may not only ſee ſome beauty, but feel ſome pleaſure in them, from natural tho' unſanctified affections leading to them. But truly good actions, inſtances of holy obedience to God, in their manner, and in the principles from which they ought to flow, they neither can approve nor perform.

Nothing can be done agreeable to the will of God, but what hath the following properties. It muſt be done from a ſenſe, not only of the unalterable obligation, but the perfect excellence of the law of God *; renouncing all pretence of merit in the actor †; depending for aſſiſtance entirely on divine ſtrength ‡; and with a ſingle eye to the divine glory ‖. It is not the matter of an action that renders it truly holy, but the prevalence of theſe principles in the heart of the performer. And they are ſo far from being generally approved, that they are hated and deſpiſed, and the very profeſſion of moſt of them at leaſt, ridiculed by every worldly man. The truth is, it is not eaſy to diſcover theſe principles otherwiſe than by narration. They ly deep in the heart, they do not ſeek to diſcover themſelves, and the ſhewing them on the ſtage would be a ſort of contradiction to their nature. I believe it would exceed the art of moſt poets or actors, to exhibit by outward ſigns, true ſelf-denial, without joining to it ſuch oſtentation as would deſtroy its effect. Or if it could be done, it would be ſo far from being delightful to thoſe who *through the pride of their heart will not ſeek after God*, that it would fill them with diſguſt or diſdain. So that all friends of the ſtage ought to join with David Hume, who hath excluded ſelf-denial,

* Rom. vii. 12. † Gal. ii. 20. Phil. iii. 8. ‡ John xv. 5.
‖ 1 Cor. x. 31. 1 Pet. iv. 11.

denial, humility, and mortification from the number of the virtues, and ranked them among the vices.

From this it appears, that worldly men will bear a form of godlineſs, but the ſpirit and power of it they cannot endure. When therefore, the ſcriptures repreſent religion, or any part of it, as amiable in the eyes of mankind in general, it is only giving one view of its excellence in itſelf or in its matter: But this can never be intended to make the judgment of bad men its ſtandard or meaſure. Or, when the approbation of men is propoſed as an argument to duty, it cannot be conſidered in any other light, than as an aſſiſtant ſubordinate motive to preſerve us from its violation; for the ſcriptures will never warrant us to aim at the praiſe of men as the reward of our compliance.

If there be any more than what is ſaid above in the teſtimony which wicked men give in favour of religion, it is but the voice of natural conſcience, that is, the voice of God in them, and not their own; and as it is extorted from them againſt their will, they do all in their power to deſtroy the force of the evidence. This we may be ſenſible of, if we will recollect, that it is always general, and that many ſpeak well of ſomething which they call religion, in general, when yet there is hardly any of the ſervants of God, in whoſe character and conduct they will not endeavour either to find or make a flaw. The truth is, tho' ſome few heroes in profanity, vilify religion in itſelf directly, and in all its parts, the plurality of ſcoffers only tell you, this and the other thing is not religion, but ſuperſtition, preciſeneſs, fancy or whim, and ſo on. But at the ſame time, if you take away all that by ſome or other is reflected on under theſe appellations, you will leave little behind. Which plainly teaches us this truth, that no man will cordially approve of ſuch a ſcheme of religion as he does not believe and embrace, or inwardly and without diſſimulation applaud a character that is better than his own: at leaſt, than his own either is, or he ſecretly hopes it to

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be *. For this reaſon, the apoſtle John gives it as a mark or evidence of regeneration, *We know that we have paſſed from death to life, becauſe we love the brethren*, that is to ſay, a ſincere and prevalent love to a ſaint as ſuch, can dwell in no heart but that which is ſanctified.

It will be proper here to take notice, becauſe it has ſome relation to this ſubject, of what the advocates of the ſtage often make their boaſt, that before a poliſhed audience things groſly criminal are not ſuffered to be acted; and that it is one of the rules of the drama, that, if ſuch things be ſuppoſed, they muſt be kept behind the ſcenes. We are often put in mind of the pure taſte of an Athenian audience, who, upon one of the actors

* For aſſertaining the ſenſe, and confirming the truth of this paſſage, it is proper to obſerve, That by the word [better] is not ſo much to be underſtood higher in degree, as different in kind. Tho' even in the firſt ſenſe, it ſeems to hold pretty generally, in compariſons between man and man. Men commonly extend their charity to thoſe who have leſs, and not to thoſe who have more goodneſs than themſelves. There are very few, who, when they ſee others more ſtrict and regular in their conduct than they are willing to be, do not aſcribe it either to weakneſs, or hypocriſy. Perhaps, indeed, the reaſon of this may be, that a gradual difference as to the actions done, is conſidered as conſtituting a ſpecific difference in the moral character; and men condemn others not for being better than themſeves, upon their own notion of goodneſs, but for placing religion in the extremes which they apprehend ought to be avoided. This confirms the remark made above, that every man's own character is the ſtandard of his approbation, and ſhows at the ſame time its conſiſtency with that humility which is eſſential to every Chriſtian. Wherever there is a real approbation, and ſincere confeſſion, of ſuperior worth, there is alſo an unfeigned imitation of it. The Chriſtian, not only knows himſelf to be infinitely diſtant from God, whom yet he ſupremely loves, but thinks himſelf leſs than the leaſt of all ſaints; but he could neither love the one nor the other, if he had not a real, however diſtant likeneſs; if he had not the ſeeds of every good diſpoſition implanted in him, the growth of which is his ſupreme deſire, and the improvement of which is the conſtant object of his care and diligence.

tors expreſſing a profane thought, all roſe up and left the theatre. A famous French tragedian, Corneille, alſo takes notice of it as an evidence of the improvement of the ſtage in his time, that one of his beſt written pieces had not ſucceeded, 'Becauſe 'it ſtruck the ſpectators with the horrid idea of a proſtitution to 'which a holy woman had been condemned.' As to the caſe of the Athenians, it were eaſy to ſhow from the nature and circumſtances of the fact, that this reſentment at the profanity of the poet, tho' it was expreſſed in the theatre, was by no means learned there. But it is needleſs to enter into any nice diſquiſition upon this ſubject, for all that follows from any ſuch inſtances, is, that there are ſome things ſo very groſs and ſhocking, that, as but a few of the moſt abandoned will commit them, ſo, the reſt of the world can have no delight in beholding them. There is, no doubt, a great variety of characters differing one from another in the degree of their degeneracy, and yet all of them eſſentially diſtinct from true piety.

To ſet this matter in a juſt light we muſt remember, that, as has been confeſſed above, the matter of many good actions, or a defective imperfect form of virtue is approved by the generality of the world; and, that they are very much ſwayed in their actions by a view to public praiſe. Therefore, they are mutually checks to one another, and vice is not ſeen on a theatre in a groſs, but commonly in a more dangerous, becauſe an engaging and inſinuating form. The preſence of ſo many witneſſes does reſtrain and diſguiſe ſin, but cannot change its nature, or render it innocent. The purity of the theatre can never be carried farther by the taſte of the audience, than what is required in converſation with the polite and faſhionable world. There vice is in ſome meaſure reſtrained; men may be wicked, but they muſt not be rude. How much this amounts to, is but too well known; it is no more than that we muſt not diſguſt thoſe with whom we converſe, and varies with their character. This is ſo far from

from being agreeable to the rules of the goſpel, that a ſerious Chriſtian is often obliged, from a ſenſe of duty, to be guilty of a breach of good manners, by adminiſtring unacceptable reproof.

Thus it appears, that, in the ſtage, the audience gives law to the poet, which is much the ſame thing as the ſcholar chooſing his own leſſon, and whether this be a ſafe or profitable method of inſtruction is eaſy to judge. Every one who knows human nature, eſpecially who believes the repreſentation given of it in Scripture, muſt conclude, that the young will be ſeduced into the commiſſion, and the older confirmed and hardened in the practice of ſin, becauſe characters fundamentally wrong will be there painted out in an amiable light, and diveſted of what is moſt ſhameful and ſhocking. By this means conſcience, inſtead of being alarmed and giving faithful teſtimony, is deceived and made a party in the cauſe. In ſhort, vice in the theatre muſt wear the garb, aſſume the name, and claim the reward of virtue. How ſtrong a confirmation of this have we from experience? Have not plays in fact commonly turned upon the characters moſt grateful, and the events moſt intereſting to corrupt nature? Pride, under the name of greatneſs of mind, ambition and revenge, under thoſe of valour and heroiſm, have been their conſtant ſubjects. But chiefly love: this, which is the ſtrongeſt paſſion, and the moſt dangerous in the human frame, and from which the greateſt number of crimes, and crimes the moſt atrocious, have ſprung, was always encouraged upon the ſtage. There, women are ſwelled with vanity, by ſeeing their ſex always deified and adored; there, men learn the language, as well as feel by ſympathy, the tranſports of that paſſion; and there, the hearts of both are open and unguarded to receive the impreſſion, becauſe it is covered with a maſk of honour. Hath this then been only the caſe at particular times of occaſional corruption, or for want of a proper regulation of the ſtage? No, It is inſeparable from its conſtitution. Such hath been the nature and tendency of plays in all former ages, and ſuch, from the taſte and diſpoſition

of thoſe who attend them, it is certain they will for ever continue to be *. Ano-

* Perhaps, it will be alledged, that the whole force of this reaſoning may be evaded, by ſuppoſing a ſtage directed by the magiſtrate, and ſupported at the public charge. In this caſe the performers would be under no temptation, for gain, to gratify the taſte of the audience, and the managers would have a quite different intention. It is confeſſed, that this ſuppoſition ſeems conſiderably to weaken the arguments above uſed, though, perhaps, more in theory than it would do in practice. But I would aſk any who make ſuch a ſuppoſition, Why this inviolable attachment to the ſtage? Why muſt ſo many efforts be made to preſerve it in ſome ſhape or other? What are its mighty benefits, that it muſt be forced as it were out of its own natural courſe in order to make it lawful, rather than we will give it up as pernicious? --- It is alſo to be obſerved, that, however uſeful an ordinance of God magiſtracy be for public order, there is very little ſecurity in the direction of magiſtrates, for ſound and wholeſome inſtruction in religion or morals. We can never depend upon them for this, unleſs they are themſelves perſons of true piety, and not always even when that is the caſe, becauſe they may be guilty of many errors in judgment. Now it is not reaſonable to hope, that magiſtrates, in any country, will be always, or even generally, perſons of true piety. Such, with the other qualifications neceſſary to magiſtrates, are not always to be found. Neither is there any neceſſity for it; becauſe, tho' doubtleſs, thoſe who fear God will be the moſt faithful magiſtrates, and the moſt dutiful ſubjects, yet the greateſt part of the duties of both may be performed without this, in a manner, in which the public will ſee and feel very little difference. Magiſtracy has only the outward carriage, and not the heart for its object, and it is the ſenſible effect which the public looks for, and not the principle from which any thing is done. Therefore, as on the one hand, if a ſubject obeys the laws, and outwardly fulfills the duties of his ſtation, the magiſtrate hath nothing farther to demand, tho' it be only for *wrath*, and not *for conſcience ſake*; ſo on the other, if a magiſtrate be diligent in preſerving order and promoting the general good, though the motive of his actions be no better than vanity, ambition, or the fear of man well concealed, the public reaps the benefit, and has no ground of complaint, even whilſt his character is deteſtable in the ſight of God. But this magiſtrate can never be ſafely truſted with the direction of what regards our moral or ſpiritual improvement, and he would be going out of his own ſphere ſhould he attempt it. ------After all, it makes little difference whether the magiſtrate or any body elſe directs the ſtage, while the attendance is voluntary; for in that caſe, it muſt either be ſuited to the taſte of the audience, or it will be wholly deſerted.

Another argument which ſhews the ſtage to be an improper method of inſtruction, or rather that it is pernicious and hurtful, may be drawn from its own nature. In its moſt improved ſtate it is a picture of human life, and muſt repreſent characters as they really are. An author for the ſtage is not permitted to feign, but to paint and copy. Tho' he ſhould introduce things or perſons ever ſo excellent, if there were not diſcerned a reſemblance between them and real life, they would be ſo far from being applauded, that they would not be ſuffered, but would be condemned as a tranſgreſſion of the fundamental rules of the art. Now, are not the great majority of characters in real life bad? Muſt not the greateſt part of thoſe repreſented on the ſtage be bad? And therefore, muſt not the ſtrong impreſſion which they make upon the ſpectators be hurtful in the ſame proportion?

It is a known truth, eſtabliſhed by the experience of all ages, that bad example has a powerful and unhappy influence upon human characters. Sin is of a contagious and ſpreading nature, and the human heart is but too ſuſceptible of the infection. This may be aſcribed to ſeveral cauſes, and to one in particular which is applicable to the preſent caſe, That the ſeeing of ſin frequently committed, muſt gradually abate that horror which we ought to have of it upon our minds, and which ſerves to keep us from yielding to its ſollicitations. Frequently ſeeing the moſt terrible objects renders them familiar to our view, and makes us behold them with leſs emotion. And, from ſeeing ſin without reluctance, the tranſition is eaſy, to a compliance with its repeated importunity, eſpecially, as there are latent remaining diſpoſitions to ſinning in every heart that is but imperfectly ſanctified. It will be difficult to aſſign any other reaſon, why wickedneſs is always carried to a far greater height in large and populous cities, than in the country. Do not multitudes, in places of great reſort, come to perpetrate calmly and ſedately, without any remorſe, ſuch crimes, as would ſurprize a leſs knowing

ing ſinner ſo much as to hear of? Can it then be ſafe, to be preſent at the exhibition of ſo many vitious characters as always muſt appear upon the ſtage? Muſt it not, like other examples, have a ſtrong, tho' inſenſible influence, and, indeed, the more ſtrong becauſe unperceived.

Perhaps ſome will ſay, This argument draws very deep, it is a reproaching of providence, and finding fault with the order which God hath appointed, at leaſt permitted, to take place in the world, where the very ſame proportion of wicked characters is to be ſeen. But is there not a wide difference between the permiſſion of any thing by a wiſe, holy, and juſt God, or its making part of the plan of providence, and our preſuming to do the ſame thing, without authority, and when we can neither reſtrain it within proper bounds, nor direct it to its proper end. There are many things which are proper and competent to God, which it would be the moſt atrocious wickedneſs in man to imitate. Becauſe it is both good and juſt in God to viſit us with ſickneſs, or to take us away by death when he ſees it proper, would it therefore be lawful in us, to bring any of them upon ourſelves at our own pleaſure? I ſhould rather be inclined to think, that theſe ſportive repreſentations on the ſtage, inſtead of being warranted by their counterpart in the world, are a daring profanation, and, as it were, a mockery of divine providence, and ſo to be conſidered in a light yet more dreadful, than any in which they have been hitherto viewed. Beſides, it ought to be remembred that, tho' evil actions, as permitted, make a part of the will of God, yet, hitherto, all who deſerve the name of Chriſtians have affirmed, that what is ſinful in any action is to be aſcribed to the will of the creature as its adequate cauſe; and therefore, exhibiting human actions and characters upon the ſtage, is, not only repreſenting the works of God, but repeating the ſins of men.

The criminal and dangerous nature of ſuch a conduct, will farther appear from this, that it is, by juſt and neceſſary conſequence,

quence, forbidden in the word of God. There we find, that tho', in his ſovereign providence, he permits the commiſſion of ſin, ſuffers his own people to continue mixed with ſinners in this ſtate, and makes their connexion with them in ſome meaſure unavoidable, as a part of their trial, yet he hath expreſly prohibited them from having any more communication with ſuch, than he himſelf hath made neceſſary. We are warned in ſcripture, that *evil communications corrupt good manners*, and therefore, that we muſt fly the ſociety of the ungodly. The Pſalmiſt tells us, *Bleſſed is the man that walketh not in the counſel of the ungodly, nor ſtandeth in the way of ſinners, nor ſitteth in the ſeat of the ſcornful* *. Agreeably to this the characters of good men in ſcripture are always repreſented. Thus the Pſalmiſt David records his own reſolution, *I will ſet no wicked thing before mine eyes, I hate the work of them that turn aſide, it ſhall not cleave to me. A froward heart ſhall depart from me, I will not know a wicked perſon* † The ſame ſays elſewhere, *I am a companion of all them that fear thee, and of them that keep thy precepts* ‡. *Depart from me ye evil doers, for I will keep the commandments of my God* ‖.

But there is no need of citing paſſages of ſcripture to this purpoſe; it is well known, that good men, tho' they will be very cautious of raſhly determining characters that are doubtful, and will far leſs diſcover a proud and phariſaical contempt of any who may yet be veſſels of mercy, will however, careſully avoid all unneceſſary communication with ſinners. They will neither follow their perſons from inclination, nor view their conduct with pleaſure. On the contrary, when they cannot wholly fly from their ſociety, it becomes a heavy burden, and in ſome caſes intolerable, and ſo as to require the interpoſition of the ſame kind providence that *delivered juſt Lot, vexed with the filthy converſation of the wicked.* Is there any conſiſtency between ſuch a character, and attending the ſtage with delight? Will

* Pſal i. 1. † Pſal. ci. 3, 4. ‡ Pſal. cxix. 63. ‖ Ib. ver. 115.

Will thoſe who *behold tranſgreſſors, and are grieved,* crowd with eagerneſs to the theatre, where the ſame perſons and actions are brought under a review? Will what affected them with ſorrow in the commiſſion, be voluntarily choſen, and made ſubſervient to their pleaſure in the repetition?

I cannot help here calling to mind the anxious concern, which wiſe and pious parents uſually ſhew for their children, on account of the ſnares to which they are unavoidably expoſed in an evil world. How carefully do they point out, and how ſolemnly do they charge them to ſhun the paths in which deſtroyers go. They uſe this caution with reſpect to the world, even as under the government of God, and in ſo doing they follow the example of their Saviour, who, in the proſpect of leaving his diſciples, after many excellent advices, puts up for them this interceſſory prayer; *And now I am no more in this world, but theſe are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep thro' thine own name thoſe whom thou haſt given me, that they may be one, as we are.——I pray not that thou ſhouldſt take them out of the world, but that thou ſhouldſt keep them from the evil* *. Can any expect that this prayer will be heard in their behalf, who are not content with ſeeing the world as it is ordered by a wiſe and holy God, but muſt ſee it over again, in a vile imitation, by a ſinful man.

It will probably be ſaid, that this ſtrikes as much againſt Hiſtory, at leaſt the writing and reading of human, commonly called profane hiſtory, as againſt the writing and ſeeing of dramatic repreſentations. But the caſes are by no means the ſame; the knowledge of hiſtory is, in many reſpects, neceſſary for the great purpoſes of religion. Were not this the caſe, there would be little difficulty in admitting the conſequence. Perhaps, even as it is, it had been better for the world that ſeveral ancient facts and characters, which now ſtand upon record, had been buried in

* John xvii. 11, 15.

in oblivion *. At any rate, it may be ſafely affirmed, that romances and fabulous narrations are a ſpecies of compoſition, from which the world hath received as little benefit, and as much hurt, as any that can be named, excepting plays themſelves, to which they are ſo nearly allied. The firſt are only exceeded by the laſt, as to their capacity of doing miſchief, by the circumſtances of action, and the preſence at once of ſo many perſons, among whom, by mutual ſympathy, the ſpiritual poiſon ſpreads faſter and penetrates deeper.

Leaſt it ſhould be pretended, that ſuch a turn is given to things in the repreſentation, as that, tho' the greateſt part of the actions repreſented are ill in themſelves, yet vice is reproached;

* Perhaps, ſome will be ſurprized at what is here ſaid on the ſubject of Hiſtory, who have not uſually viewed it in this light. And, indeed, this is the great difficulty in the whole of the preſent argument, to overcome ſtrong prepoſſeſſions, and to ſhew men the ſin and danger of a practice, which they know to be common, and have been long accuſtomed to look upon as lawful and ſafe. For this reaſon, it is probable, that the beſt way of proving that the above aſſertion on the ſubject of Hiſtory, is agreeable to ſcripture and reaſon, will be, by a caſe perfectly ſimilar, but more frequently handled. Do not all Chriſtian writers, without exception, who treat of the government of the tongue, lay down this as a rule, that we are not to report the ſins of others, tho' we know the truth of the facts, unleſs where it is neceſſary to ſome good end? Now, why ſhould there be any different rule in writing than in converſation? What is done either way is the ſame in ſubſtance, *viz.* communicating information; and writing, which may be called viſible ſpeech, is much more laſting in its nature and extenſive in its effects. If any aſk, How, or why the knowledge of hiſtory is neceſſary to the purpoſes of religion? I anſwer, It is neceſſary for proving the truths of natural, and confirming thoſe of revealed religion, for repelling the attacks of adverſaries, and giving us ſuch a view of the plan of Providence, as may excite us to the exerciſe of the duties of adoration, thankfulneſs, truſt, and ſubmiſſion to the ſupreme diſpoſer of all events. Real facts only are proper for this purpoſe, and not feigned ſtories, in the choice and dreſſing of which, experience teaches us, the great end is, that man may be pleaſed, and not that God may be glorified.

ed or ridiculed, virtue ſet upon a throne, rewarded and honoured; Let it be called to mind, that, as has been ſhewn above, the author is not left at liberty to do in this as he pleaſes. He muſt gratify the public taſte, and the rules he is obliged to obſerve have rather the contrary effect. For he muſt diveſt his bad characters of what is moſt horrid and ſhocking, and preſent them leſs deformed than they really are. Beſides, tho' he may conceal a part, he muſt not alter nature ſo far as he goes, but take it as he finds it. Accordingly, ſome of our modern critics tell us, that there ought to be no particular moral in a dramatic performance, becauſe that is a departure from nature, and ſo not in taſte.

It ought not to be forgotten, that attending dramatic repreſentations is not only ſeeing a great plurality of bad characters without neceſſity, and ſeeing them with patience, but it is ſeeing them with pleaſure. Whether or not entertainment be yielded to be the only or ultimate effect of plays, ſurely, it cannot be denied to be one effect ſought and expected from them, and from every part of them. An actor is as much applauded, and gives as much pleaſure to the ſpectators, when he repreſents a bad character to the life, as a good. Is there no danger then, that a heart ſoftned by delight, ſhould be more liable to infection from evil than at other times? Is there no danger, that an aſſociation ſhould be formed in the mind, between the ſenſe of pleaſure and the commiſſion of ſin? Will any perſon affirm, that, in ſuch circumſtances, he feels that holy indignation againſt ſin, which every Chriſtian ought to conceive upon ſeeing it committed? Or, that he is able to preſerve that awe and fear, which he ought to have of the juſt judgment of God, when he ſees the crimes that merit it boldly re-acted, and finely mimicked in a perſonated character.

So far is this from being the caſe, that every perſon attending the repreſentation of a play, enters in ſome meaſure himſelf, as well as the actors, into the ſpirit of each character, and the more

more ſo the better the action is performed. His attention is ſtrongly fixed, his affections are ſeized and carried away, and a total forgetfulneſs of every thing takes place, except what is immediately before him. Can the various paſſions be ſo ſtrongly excited as they are ſometimes known to be, and no effect remain? Will not the paſſion of love, for example, after it has been ſtrongly felt by the ſpectator in ſympathy with the actor, be a little more ready to recur, eſpecially as nature prompts, and various ſolliciting objects are daily preſented to his eyes? The author terminates his plot as he ſees beſt, and draws what concluſions he thinks proper from his characters, but he has no reaſon to think, that he can controul the paſſions which he raiſes in the ſpectators in the ſame manner, and not ſuffer them to exceed the bounds of his deſcription. Will not the paſſion of revenge, that right hand of a falſe greatneſs of mind, after it has been ſtrongly excited in the theatre, be apt to riſe again upon every real or ſuppoſed provocation? Some learned obſervers of nature tell us, that every paſſion we feel cauſes a new modification of the blood and ſpirits; if there is any truth in this, then every paſſion excited in the theatre takes poſſeſſion for a time of the very animal frame, makes a ſeat to itſelf, and prepares for a ſpeedy return.

Having thus endeavoured to ſhew, that the ſtage, whether amuſement or inſtruction be aimed at in it, cannot be attended by any Chriſtian without ſin; there is a third general argument againſt it, which merits conſideration. It is, that no perſon can contribute to the encouragement of the ſtage, without being partaker of the ſins of others. This is proper to be attended to, as it is againſt a public theatre that the arguments in this eſſay are chiefly levelled; ſo that, if it be criminal at all, every perſon attending it, is not only faulty by his own proper conduct, but is farther chargeable with the guilt of ſeducing others. Beſides without this, the argument, to ſome, would not be altogether compleat, for after all that has been advanced, there

may be a few, who in a good meaſure yield it to be true, and yet have another ſubterfuge remaining. They acknowledge, perhaps, that it is a moſt hazardous amuſement, to which others ought ordinarily to be preferred; That the bulk of plays will, much more probably, pollute than improve the far greateſt part of thoſe who attend them. Yet ſtill, they are apt to figure to themſelves particular caſes as exceptions from the general rule, and to ſuppoſe, there are *ſome* plays which may be attended, or at leaſt, that there are *ſome* perſons who have ſo much clearneſs of judgment, and ſo much conſtancy in virtue, as to ſeparate the corn from the chaff. At a particular time, they ſuppoſe, a perſon of this kind may, without receiving any hurt, be improved by the fine ſentiments contained in plays; and alſo learn ſomething, to be applied to other purpoſes, of that force and juſtneſs of action, that grace and beauty of behaviour, which is no where ſeen in ſo great perfection as on the ſtage.

Upon this ſubject in general, it may be affirmed, that thoſe who have this confidence in the ſtrength of their own virtue, are far from being the perſons who may be moſt ſafely truſted in a place of danger. On the contrary, thoſe will probably be moſt truly ſtedfaſt, when expoſed to temptation, who are moſt diffident of themſelves, and do not wantonly run into it. Yet, ſince ſome may take encouragement from ſuch apprehenſions, it is proper to obſerve, that, tho' there were truth in their pretence, yet would it not therefore be lawful for them to attend the theatre. They could not do ſo without contributing to the ſins of others, a thing expreſly prohibited in the holy ſcriptures, and, indeed, diametrically oppoſite to the two principal branches of true religion, concern for the glory of God, and compaſſion to the ſouls of men.

There are two ways in which the occaſional attending of plays, by thoſe who are of good character, even ſuppoſing it not hurtful to themſelves, contributes to the ſins of others. (1.) By ſupporting the players in that unchriſtian occupation.

(2.)

(2.) Encouraging, by their example, thoſe to attend all plays indiſcriminately, who are in moſt danger of infection.

Firſt, It contributes to ſupport the players in an unchriſtian occupation. After what has been ſaid above, and which I now take for granted, on the impropriety of plays as an amuſement, and the impoſſibility of furniſhing a ſtage with nothing but ſound and wholeſome productions, little doubt can remain, that the occupation of players is inconſiſtent with the character of a Chriſtian. Whatever occaſional preſence may be to ſome ſpectators, continual performing can never be lawful to the actors. On the very beſt ſuppoſition, it is a life of perpetual amuſement, which is equally contrary to reaſon and religion. It is a mean proſtitution of the rational powers, to have no higher end in view, than contributing to the pleaſure and entertainment of the idle part of mankind, and, inſtead of taking amuſement with the moderation of a Chriſtian, to make it the very buſineſs and employment of life. How ſtrange a character does it make for one to live, in a manner, perpetually in a maſk, to be much oftener in a perſonated than in a real character? And yet this is the caſe with all players, if, to the time ſpent in the repreſentation, you add that which is neceſſary to prepare for their public appearances. What foul polluted minds muſt theſe be, which are ſuch a receptacle of foreign vanities, beſides their own natural corruption, and where one ſyſtem or plan of folly is obliterated only to make way for another.

But the life of players is not only idle and vain, and therefore inconſiſtent with the character of a Chriſtian, but it is ſtill more directly and groſly criminal. We have ſeen above, that, not only from the taſte of the audience, the prevailing tendency of all ſucceſsful plays muſt be bad, but that, in the very nature of the thing, the greateſt part of the characters repreſented muſt be vicious. What then is the life of a player? It is wholly ſpent in endeavouring to expreſs the language, and exhibit a perfect picture of the paſſions of vicious men. For this purpoſe, they muſt

ſtrive

ſtrive to enter into the ſpirit, and feel the ſentiments proper to ſuch characters. Unleſs they do ſo, the performance will be quite faint and weak, if not wholly faulty and unnatural. And can they do this ſo frequently without retaining much of the impreſſion, and, at laſt, becoming in truth what they are ſo often in appearance. Do not the characters of all men take a tincture from their employment and way of life? How much more muſt theirs be infected, who are converſant, not in outward occupations, but in characters themſelves, the actions, paſſions and affections of men? If their performances touch the audience ſo ſenſibly, and produce in them ſo laſting an effect, how much more muſt the ſame effects take place in themſelves, whoſe whole time is ſpent in this manner.

This is ſo certain, and, at the ſame time ſo acknowledged a truth, that even thoſe who are fondeſt of theatrical amuſements, do yet, ſtill, eſteem the employment of players a mean and forbid profeſſion. Their character has been infamous in all ages, juſt a living copy of that vanity, obſcenity, and impiety which, is to be found in the pieces which they repreſent. As the world has been polluted by the ſtage, ſo they have always been more eminently ſo, as it is natural to ſuppoſe, being the very ciſterns in which this pollution is collected, and from which it is diſtributed to others. It makes no difference in the argument, that we muſt here ſuppoſe the ſtage to be regulated and improved, for, as it has been ſhown, that it can never be ſo regulated as to be ſafe for the ſpectators, it muſt be always worſe for the actors, between whom and the audience the ſame proportion will ſtill remain. Can it then be lawful in any to contribute, in the leaſt degree, to ſupport men in this unhallowed employment? Is not the theatre, truly and eſſentially, what it has been often called rhetorically, the ſchool of impiety, where it is their very buſineſs to learn wickedneſs? And will a Chriſtian, upon any pretended advantage to himſelf, join in this confederacy againſt

God,

God, and aſſiſt in endowing and upholding the dreadful ſeminary?

Secondly, Men of good character going occaſionally to the theatre contributes to the ſins of others, by emboldening thoſe to attend all plays indiſcriminately, who are in moſt danger of infection. If there be any at all, eſpecially if there be a great number, to whom the ſtage is noxious and ſinful, every one without exception is bound to abſtain. The apoſtle Paul expreſly commands the Corinthians to abſtain from lawful things, when their uſing them would make their brother to offend, that is to ſay, would lead him into ſin. *But take heed, leſt by any means, this liberty of yours become a ſtumbling-block to them that are weak. For if any man ſee thee which haſt knowledge ſit at meat in the idols temple, ſhall not the conſcience of him that is weak, be emboldened to eat thoſe things which are offered to idols? And thro' thy knowledge ſhall the weak brother periſh, for whom Chriſt died. But when ye ſin ſo againſt the brethren, and wound their weak conſcience, ye ſin againſt Chriſt. Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no fleſh while the world ſtandeth, leſt I make my brother to offend* *.

There are many who ſeem to have entirely forgot that this precept is to be found in the word of God, and diſcover not the leaſt ſenſe of their obligation to comply with it. If, by any plauſible pretences, they imagine they can vindicate their conduct with regard to themſelves, or palliate it with excuſes, they are quite unmindful of the injury which they do to others. I ſpeak not here of offending, in the ſenſe in which that word is commonly, tho' unjuſtly taken, as diſpleaſing others. Such as are diſpleaſed with the conduct of thoſe who attend the theatre, becauſe they eſteem it to be ſinful, are not thereby offended in the Scripture ſenſe of that word, except in ſo far, as ſome few of them are provoked to unchriſtian reſentment, or induced to draw raſh and general concluſions, from the indiſcretion of particular

* 1 Cor. viii. 9.---13.

ticular perſons, to the prejudice of whole orders of men. But vaſt multitudes are truly offended or made to offend, as they are led into a practice, which, whatever it be to thoſe who ſet the example, is undoubtedly pernicious to them. Is it poſſible to deny, that, under the beſt regulation of the theatre that can reaſonably be hoped for, to great numbers it muſt be hurtful, eſpecially as it is enticing to all? And, if that be but allowed, perſons of character and reputation cannot attend without contributing to the miſchief that is done.

Perhaps it will be objected to this application of the paſſage of ſcripture cited above, that the particular danger there pointed out by the apoſtle, is inducing men to venture upon a practice with a doubting conſcience. I think it highly probable, that this very preciſe caſe happens with many, who go to the theatre following the example of others. They are not entirely ſatisfied of its lawfulneſs, they ſtill have ſome inward reluctance of mind, but adventure to gratify a carnal inclination, being emboldened by the example of thoſe who are eſteemed men of underſtanding and worth. But, even where their implicit truſt is ſo ſtrong as fully to ſatisfy them, and ſet their minds at eaſe, the apoſtle's argument holds with equal force, if, thereby, they are unavoidably led into ſin.

This will probably be looked upon as a very hard law, and it will be aſked, Is a man, then, never to do any thing that he has reaſon to believe will be miſinterpreted, or abuſed by others to their own hurt? The hardneſs of the law will wholly evaniſh, if we remember, that it is confined to things indifferent in their nature. In duties binding of their own nature, we are under no obligation to pay any regard to the opinions of others, or the conſequences of our conduct upon them. But in things originally indifferent, which become duties, or not, preciſely on account of their conſequences, there, we are to beware of making our brother to offend. The ſcripture rule is this, We muſt not commit the leaſt ſin under pretence of the moſt important

end,

end, tho' it were to ſave multitudes from ſins incomparably more heinous. But in matters of indifference, we are not to value the moſt beloved enjoyment ſo highly, as to endanger the ſalvation of one human ſoul by enſnaring it into ſin. And can a real believer have the ſmalleſt objection, the leaſt riſing thought, againſt this equitable law? Shall we value any preſent gratification equally, nay, ſhall we once put it in the ballance with the ſpiritual intereſt of an immortal ſoul? Now, who will be ſo ſhameleſs as to aſſert, that attending a public ſtage is to him a neceſſary duty? Or what defender of the ſtage will be ſo ſanguine as to affirm, that it is, or that he hopes to ſee it regulated ſo as to be ſafe or profitable to every mind? And yet till this is the caſe, it evidently ſtands condemned by the apoſtolic rule.

Since writing the above, I have met with a pamphlet juſt publiſhed, entituled, *The Morality of Stage-plays ſeriouſly conſidered.* This author convinces me, that I have, without ſufficient ground, ſuppoſed, that no body would affirm attending plays to be a neceſſary duty; for he has either done it, or gone ſo very near it, that probably, the next author upon the ſame ſide will do it in plain terms, and aſſert, that all above the ſtation of tradeſmen who do not go to the play-houſe, are living in the habitual neglect of their duty, and ſinning grievouſly againſt God. If this looks ridiculous, it is none of my fault, for I ſpeak it ſeriouſly; and it is a much more natural conſequence from his reaſoning, than any he has drawn from it himſelf.

He conſiders the paſſage of the apoſtle Paul, and ſays, (which is true) that it holds only in the caſe of indifferent actions, but that we are to 'do good in the face of prejudice.' The way in which he ſhews it to be doing good, is pretty ſingular, but I paſs it by for a little, and obſerve, that probably, he is not much accuſtomed to commenting on ſuch paſſages of ſcripture, for, even granting his unreaſonable ſuppoſition, doing good indefinitely is not oppoſed to indifferent actions in this, or any ſimilar caſe. An action that is good in itſelf is indifferent when it may be exchanged for another; when one as good, or

better, may be put in its place. Nothing is oppoſed to indifferent actions here, but what is indiſpenſibly neceſſary, and abſolutely binding, both in itſelf, and in its circumſtances. And indeed, tho' he is afraid at firſt to ſay ſo, he ſeems to carry the matter that length at laſt, making his concluſion a little broader than the premiſes, and ſaying in the cloſe of the paragraph upon that ſubject, 'What they do to this purpoſe, either in oppoſing the bad, or promoting the good, is MATTER OF DUTY, 'and their conduct in it is not to be regulated by the opinion 'of any perſon who is pleaſed to take offence*.'

But how ſhall we refute this new and wonderful doctrine of its being neceſſary that good men ſhould attend the theatre. I cannot think of a better way of doing it, than tearing off ſome of the drapery of words, with which it is adorned and diſguiſed, and ſetting his own aſſertions together in the form of a ſyllogiſm, 'The 'manager of every theatre muſt ſuit his entertainments to the 'company, and, if he is not ſupported by the grave and ſober, 'he muſt ſuit himſelf to the licentious and prophane.'——'We 'know that in every nation there muſt be amuſements and pub'lic entertainments, and the ſtage has always made one in every 'civilized and poliſhed nation. We cannot hope to aboliſh it.' —— *Ergo*, According to this author, it is the duty of good men to attend the ſtage. But I leave the reader to judge, Whether, from the firſt of his propoſitions, which is a certain truth, it is not more juſt to infer, that, till the majority of thoſe who attend the ſtage are good, its entertainment cannot be fit for a Chriſtian ear; and, becauſe that will never be, no Chriſtian ought to go there.

And what a ſhameful begging of the queſtion is his ſecond propoſition, 'That we cannot hope to aboliſh it.' It is hard to tell what we may hope for in this age, but we inſiſt that it ought to be aboliſhed. Nay, we do hope to aboliſh it juſt as much as other vices; we cannot hope to ſee the time when there ſhall be no gaming, cheating or lying, but we muſt ſtill preach againſt

* Page 23.

againſt all ſuch vices, and will never exhort good men to go to gaming tables, to perſuade them to play fair, and leſſen the wickedneſs of the practice. In ſhort, it is a full refutation of the extravagant aſſertion of good men being obliged, as matter of duty, to go to the theatre, that no ſuch thing is commanded in the word of God, and therefore it is not, and cannot be neceſſary to any †. And, ſince it is evidently pernicious to great numbers, it can be lawful to none.

It would give Chriſtians a much more juſt, as well as more extenſive view of their duty, than they commonly have, if they would conſider their relation to, and neceſſary influence on one another. All their viſible actions have an effect upon others as well as themſelves. Every thing we ſee or hear makes ſome impreſſion on us, though for the moſt part unperceived, and we contribute, every moment, to form each others character. What a melancholy view, then, does it give us of the ſtate of religion among us at preſent, that, when piety towards God has been excluded from many moral ſyſtems, and the whole of virtue confined to the duties of ſocial life, the better half of theſe alſo ſhould be cut of, and all regard to the ſouls of others forgotten or derided. Nothing, indeed, is left but a few expreſſions of compliment, a few inſignificant offices of preſent conveniency: For that which ſome modern refiners have dignified with the name of virtue, is nothing elſe but poliſhed luxury, a flattering of each other in their vices, a provocation of each other to ſenſual indulgence, and that *friendſhip of the world*, which *is enmity with God*.

I would now aſk the reader, after peruſing the preceeding arguments againſt the ſtage, Whether he is convinced that it is inconſiſtent with the character of a Chriſtian, or not? If he ſhall

† It is proper here to remark, how natural it was to ſuppoſe, that the argument would be carried this length, when the ſtage came to be pled for as uſeful in promoting the intereſts of virtue. And therefore I have, above, taken notice, that theſe prophets run unſent, the propriety of which remark will now clearly appear.

ſhall anſwer in the negative, if he has ſtill ſome remaining argument in its defence, or ſome method, which has not occurred to me, to take off the force of the reaſoning, I would next aſk, Whether it does not at leaſt render it a doubtful point? Whether, joined with the concurrent teſtimony of the beſt and wiſeſt men in all ages againſt it, as it appeared among them, and the impurity and corruption that ſtill attends it, there is not at leaſt ſome ground of heſitation? And, if ſo much be but allowed, it becomes on this very account unlawful to every Chriſtian, who takes the word of God for the rule of his conduct. There, clear evidence, and full perſuaſion is required before an action can be lawful, and where doubt ariſes we are commanded to abſtain. *Happy is he that condemneth not himſelf in that thing which he alloweth: and he that doubteth is damned, if he eat; becauſe he eateth not of faith, for whatſoever is not of faith is ſin* *.

Hitherto we have reaſoned againſt what is called a *well-regulated ſtage*. That is to ſay, inſtead of attacking the corruptions which now adhere to it, we have endeavoured to ſhow, that from the purpoſe intended by it, from the preſent ſtate and general taſte of mankind, and the nature of the thing itſelf, a public theatre is not capable of ſuch a regulation, as to make it conſiſtent with the purity of the Chriſtian profeſſion to attend or ſupport it. If any complain, that part of the above reaſoning is too abſtracted, and not quite level to the apprehenſion of every reader, let it be remembered, that it is directed againſt an idea ſo abſtracted, that it never yet did, and, from what we have ſeen, there is reaſon to believe it never can exiſt. It is indeed altogether imaginary, and is dreſt up by every author who defends it, in the manner and form that beſt pleaſes himſelf; ſo that it is infinitely leſs difficult to refute or ſhew the unlawfulneſs of a well-regulated ſtage, than to know what it is.

If the authors on this ſubject would enter into particulars, and give us a liſt of the uſeful and inſtructive plays with which

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* Rom. xiv. 22, 23.

our ſtage is to be ſerved; lay down a plan of ſtrict diſcipline, for introducing and preſerving piety and purity among the actors; and ſhew us by whom the managers are to be choſen, and their fidelity tried, with ſome general rules for their conduct; it might ſoon be determined by plain and ſimple arguments, Whether ſuch an entertainment could be ſafely permitted to a Chriſtian, or not. But, when they give us no farther account of it, than by calling it a ſtage properly regulated, they involve themſelves, at once, in obſcurity, as to the very ſubject of their diſcourſe. It is no wonder then, that they can make a parade with a few glittering, unmeaning phraſes, as, picture of nature, moral lecture, amiable character, compaſſion for virtue in diſtreſs, decency of the drama, and ſeveral others. We are put to a ſtand what to ſay to ſuch things, for if we ſpeak of the impure ſentiments of authors, or the wanton geſticulations of actors, all theſe are immediately given up, and yet the fort remains as entire as ever. Therefore, the method taken in this treatiſe, with all the diſadvantages that attend it, was looked upon to be the beſt and the cleareſt that could be choſen; to ſhow, that thoſe from whom a reformation of the ſtage muſt come, are neither able nor willing to make it; that the very materials of which this fine ſyſtem is to conſiſt are naught, and therefore, ſo muſt the product be always found upon trial.

It may indeed be matter of wonder, that among the many ſchemes and projects daily offered to the conſideration of the public, there has never been any attempt to point out a plauſible way, how the ſtage may be brought into, and kept in ſuch a ſtate of regulation, as to be conſiſtent with the Chriſtian character. There have been attempts to ſhow how money may be in a manner created, and the national debt paid, or the annual ſupplies raiſed, without burdening the ſubject. Some, who have nothing of their own, have endeavoured to perſuade the reſt of mankind, that it is the eaſieſt thing imaginable to grow rich in a few years, with little labour, by the improvement of moor, moſs, or bees. But none, ſo far as I have heard or ſeen, have been

been ſo bold as to lay down a diſtinct plan for the improvement of the ſtage. When this is added to the conſiderations already mentioned, it will confirm every impartial perſon in the belief, that ſuch improvement is not to be expected.

I hope therefore, there may now be ſome proſpect of ſucceſs, in warning every one who wiſhes to be eſteemed a diſciple of Chriſt againſt the ſtage, as it hitherto has been, and now is. Experience is of all others the ſureſt teſt of the tendency of any practice. It is ſtill more to be depended on than the moſt plauſible and apparently concluſive reaſoning, upon what hath never yet been tried. Let us then conſider, what hath been the ſpirit and tendency of almoſt the whole plays which have been repreſented, from time to time, upon the ſtage. Have not love and intrigue been their perpetual theme, and that not in a common and an orderly way, but with reſiſtance and impediments, ſuch as, rivalſhip and jealouſy, the oppoſition of parents, and other things of a ſimilar nature, that the paſſions may be ſtrongly excited, and that the force of love, and its triumph over every obſtacle, may be ſet before the audience as a leſſon? Is not the polite well-bred man the hero of ſuch plays, a character formed pon the maxims of the world, and chiefly ſuch of them as are moſt contrary to the goſpel? Are not unchriſtian reſentment and falſe honour the characteriſticks of every ſuch perſon?

What is the character of a clergyman when it is taken from the ſtage? If the perſon introduced is ſuppoſed to poſſeſs any degree of ability, hypocriſy is the leading part of the character. But for the moſt part, aukwardneſs, ignorance, dullneſs and pedantry are repreſented as inſeparable from men of that function. This is not done to correct theſe faults when appearing in ſome of that profeſſion, by comparing them with others free from ſuch reproachful defects, but it is the character of the clergyman in general, who is commonly introduced ſingle, and compared with the men acquainted with the world, very little to his advantage. The truth is, it ſeems to be a maxim with dramatic authors, to ſtrip men of every profeſſion of their ſeveral

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excellencies, that the rake may be adorned with the ſpoils: even learning is commonly aſcribed to him; how conſiſtently with truth or nature, and conſequently with taſte itſelf, I leave the reader to determine.

And where can the plays be found, at leaſt comedies, that are free from impurity, either directly, or by alluſion and double meaning? It is amazing to think, that women who pretend to decency and reputation, whoſe brighteſt ornament ought to be modeſty, ſhould continue to abet, by their preſence, ſo much unchaſtity, as is to be found in the theatre. How few plays are acted which a modeſt woman can ſee, conſiſtently with decency in every part? and even when the plays are more reſerved themſeves, they are ſure to be ſeaſoned with ſomething of this kind, in the prologue, or epilogue, the muſic between the acts, or in ſome ſcandalous farce with which the diverſion is concluded. The power of cuſtom and faſhion is very great, in making people blind to the moſt manifeſt qualities and tendencies of things. There are ladies who frequently attend the ſtage, who if they were but once entertained with the ſame images in a private family, with which they are often preſented there, would riſe with indignation, and reckon their reputation ruined if ever they ſhould return. I pretend to no knowledge of theſe things, but from printed accounts, and the public bills of what plays are to be acted, ſometimes by the particular deſire of ladies of quality, and yet may ſafely affirm, that no woman of reputation (as it is called in the world) much leſs of piety, who has been ten times in a play-houſe, durſt repeat in company all that ſhe has heard there. With what conſiſtency they gravely return to the ſame ſchools of lewdneſs, they themſelves beſt know.

It ought to be conſidered, particularly with regard to the younger of both ſexes, that, in the theatre, their minds muſt inſenſibly acquire an inclination to romance and extravagance, and be unfitted for the ſober and ſerious affairs of common life. Common or little things give no entertainment upon the ſtage, except when they are ridiculed. There muſt always be ſomething

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grand, ſurprizing and ſtriking. In comedies, when all obſtacles are removed, and the marriage is agreed on, the play is done. This gives the mind ſuch a turn that it is apt to deſpiſe ordinary buſineſs as mean or deride it as ridiculous. Aſk a merchant whether he chooſes, that his apprentices ſhould go to learn exactneſs and frugality from the ſtage. Or, whether he expects the moſt punctual payments from thoſe whoſe generoſity is ſtrengthened there, by weeping over virtue in diſtreſs. Suppoſe a matron coming home from the theatre filled with the ideas that are there impreſſed upon the imagination, how low and contemptible do all the affairs of her family appear, and how much muſt ſhe be diſpoſed, (beſides the time already conſumed), to forget or miſguide them?

The actors themſelves are a ſignal proof of this. How ſeldom does it happen, if ever, that any of them live ſober and regular lives, pay their debts with honeſty, or manage their affairs with diſcretion? They are originally men of the ſame compoſition with others, but their employment wholly incapacitates them for prudence or regularity, gives them a diſſipation of mind and unſtaidneſs of ſpirit, ſo that they cannot attend to the affairs of life. Nay, if I am rightly informed, that variety of characters which they put on in the theatre deprives them of common ſenſe, and leaves them in a manner no character at all of their own. It is confidently ſaid, by thoſe who have thought it worth while to make the trial, that nothing can be more inſipid than the converſation of a player on any other ſubject than that of his profeſſion. I cannot indeed anſwer for this remark, having it only by report, and never having exchanged a word with one of that employment in my life. However, if it holds, a degree of the ſame effect muſt neceſſarily be wrought upon thoſe who attend the ſtage.

But folly or bad management is not all that is to be laid to the charge of players: They are almoſt univerſally vitious, and of ſuch abandoned characters, as might juſtly make thoſe who defend the age aſhamed to ſpeak of learning virtue under ſuch

maſters. Can men learn piety from the profane, mortification from the ſenſual, or modeſty from harlots? And will any deny that hired ſtage-players have always, and that deſervedly, born theſe characters? Nay, tho' it could be ſuppoſed, that the ſpectators received no hurt to themſelves, how is it poſſible that the performances of ſuch perſons can be attended, or their trade encouraged without ſin?

This ſhews alſo, that attending a good play, even ſuppoſing there were a few unexceptionable, cannot be vindicated upon Chriſtian principles. It is pled for the new tragedy lately introduced into our theatre, that it is an attempt to reform the ſtage, and make it more innocent, or more uſeful. What this piece is in itſelf, no body can ſay with certainty till it be publiſhed, tho' the account given of it by report is not exceeding favourable. But, let it be ever ſo excellent in itſelf, the bringing of one good play upon the ſtage is altogether inſufficient, nay, is a method quite improper for reforming it. An author of a truly good piece would rather bury it in oblivion, than lend his own credit, and that of his work, for the ſupport of thoſe that are bad. A Chriſtian can never attend the ſtage, conſiſtently with his character, till the ſcheme in general be made innocent or uſeful. He muſt not ſin himſelf, nor contribute to the ſins of others, in a certain degree, becauſe, unleſs he do ſo, they will ſin without him in a higher degree. In ſhort, ſuch an attempt can be conſidered in no other light, than as encouraging a pernicious practice, and ſupporting a criminal aſſociation. The better the play is, or the better the characters of thoſe who attend it are, the greater the miſchief, becauſe the ſtronger the temptation to others who obſerve it.

There is one inducement to attendance on the ſtage which hath more influence than all the arguments with which its advocates endeavour to colour over the practice: That it is become a part of faſhionable education. Without it young perſons of rank think they cannot have that knowledge of the

world which is neceſſary to their accompliſhment; that they will be kept in ruſticity of carriage, or narrowneſs of mind, than which nothing is more contemptible in the eyes of the reſt of mankind; that they will acquire the character of ſtiff and preciſe, and be incapable of joining in polite converſation, being ignorant of the topics upon which it chiefly turns. No better than theſe, it is to be feared, are the reaſons that many parents ſuffer their children to attend this and other faſhionable diverſions. How then ſhall we remove this difficulty? Why truly, by ſaying with the apoſtle John, to ſuch as will receive it, *All that is in the world, the luſt of the fleſh, and the luſt of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world**. It is certainly the greateſt madneſs to ſeek the knowledge of the world by partaking with the wicked in their ſins. Whatever knowledge cannot otherwiſe be acquired, is ſhameful, and not honourable. How cruel then are theſe parents, who, inſtead of endeavouring to inſpire their children with a holy and manly reſolution, of daring to appear ſingular in an adherence to their duty, ſuffer them to be plunged in ſin, that they may not be defective in politeneſs. Why ſhould the world, or any thing elſe, be known, but in order to our ſpiritual improvement†? Therefore

* 1 John ii. 16.

† This is not meant to condemn all human accompliſhments, which have not an immediate reference to our religious improvement, but to affirm, that they ought to be kept in a juſt ſubordination and ſubſerviency, to the great and chief end of man. There are, no doubt, a great number of arts, both uſeful and ornamental, which have other immediate effects, than to make men holy; and, becauſe they are, by the greateſt part of the world, abuſed to the worſt of purpoſes, they are conſidered as having no connexion with religion at all. But this is a miſtake; for a good man will be directed in the choice and application of all ſuch arts, by the general and leading purpoſe of his life. And, as he who eats for no other or higher end than pleaſing his palate, is juſtly condemned as a mean and grovelling ſenſualiſt, ſo, whoever has no farther view in his education and accompliſhment, than to ſhine and make a figure in the faſhionable world, does not in that act the part of a Chriſtian. In ſhort, theſe arts are among the number

ſore, all that is truly valuable, muſt, by the very ſuppoſition, be innocently learned, and to bear with a noble diſdain the ſcoffs of more experienced ſinners is the greateſt glory.

Like to the above is another argument in favour of the ſtage, that men muſt have amuſements, and, that the ſtage is much better than many others, which would probably be put in its place. It is ſaid, that of all the time ſpent by the faſhionable part of the world, at preſent, in diverſions, that which they allot to the ſtage is moſt innocently, or leaſt hurtfully employed. Is there any more in this, than a declaration of the ſhameful luxury and degeneracy of the preſent age, an alarming token of approaching judgment? Do not ſuch perſons know, that all ſerious Chriſtians condemn every one of theſe criminal pleaſures, and will never allow it as any advantage to exchange one of them for another. But it is leſs ſurprizing to hear ſuch palliative arguments uſed in converſation: an author above referred to has been bold enough in print, to reaſon in the ſame way. He ſays, 'That no abuſe was ever 'admitted on any ſtage, but might paſs for perfect decency, 'when compared to what may have been often heard of, at a 'goſſipping, a merry-making, or a meeting of young fellows †.' Again, after telling us, that we cannot hope to aboliſh the ſtage, he ſays, 'And if we could, we ſhould only make way 'for the return of drunkenneſs, gaming, and rude cabals, which 'the more decent converſation and manners of civilized times 'have in a great meaſure aboliſhed.' I lay hold of this gentleman's reaſoning, who pleads for civilizing the world, and not ſanctifying it, as a confeſſion of the weakneſs of his cauſe, and a confirmation of all the arguments adduced in this treatiſe againſt the ſtage. For, if he meant to ſhow, that ſtage-plays were

number of indifferent things, which ſhould be ſupremely and ultimately directed to the glory of God. When they are not capable of this, either immediately, or remotely, much more when they are contrary to it, they muſt be condemned.

† Morality of Stage plays ſeriouſly conſidered, p. 19.

were agreeable to the purity of the goſpel, that drunkenneſs is worſe (if indeed it be ſo) could be no evidence of it at all. He muſt therefore, if he ſpeaks to any purpoſe, plead for the toleration of ſinful diverſions, becauſe they are comparatively leſs ſinful than others; and if that is the caſe, I deteſt his principles, and ſo will every Chriſtian.

Having mentioned this author, perhaps it may be expected, that I ſhould take ſome notice of the other arguments brought by him in defence of the ſtage. It is not eaſy either to enumerate, or comprehend them, they are thrown together in ſuch confuſion, and expreſſed in ſuch vague and general terms. He ſays, (page 3d) 'The people of this iſland are not inferior to 'thoſe of any other age or country whatever. This will be a 'preſumption, that if plays are a poiſon, it is at leaſt but ſlow in 'its operation.' And (p.17.) 'We may venture to aſk, Whether 'knowledge, whether induſtry and commerce have declined in this 'city (Edinburgh) ſince the play-houſe was firſt opened here. 'It will be owned, that they have rather increaſed.' I would venture to aſk, What ſort of an argument this is, and what follows from it, tho' both his aſſertions were allowed to be true, which yet may eaſily be in many reſpects controverted. If the ſtage, as he would inſinuate, be the cauſe of our improvement, then is his argument ſelf-contradictory, for we ought to be greatly inferior in purity to the people of other countries, who have enjoyed the reforming ſtage much longer, which is contrary to his ſuppoſition. The truth is, the ſtage is not the cauſe, but the conſequence of wealth; and it is neither the cauſe nor conſequence of goodneſs or knowledge, except in ſo far as it certainly implies more knowledge than uncultivated ſavages poſſeſs, and is only to be found in what this author calls civilized nations. How eaſy were it for me to name ſeveral vices unknown to Barbarians, which prevail in places of taſte and poliſhed manners. Should I at the ſame time inſinuate, that theſe vices have contributed to improve us in knowledge and

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taſte, it would be juſt ſuch an argument as is here uſed in favour of the ſtage, and the plain meaning of both is, the abuſe of knowledge is the cauſe of it.

It were worth while to conſider a little our improvements in knowledge in this age, which are often the boaſt of not the moſt knowing writers. Perhaps it may be allowed, that there is now in the world a good deal of knowledge of different kinds, but it is plain we owe it to the labours of our predeceſſors, and not our own. And therefore, it is to be feared, we may improve it no better than many young men do, who come to the eaſy poſſeſſion of wealth of their father's getting. They neither know the worth nor the uſe of it, but ſquander it idly away, in the moſt unprofitable or hurtful purſuits. It is, doubtleſs, an eaſy thing at preſent, to acquire a ſuperficial knowledge, from Magazines, Reviews, Dictionaries, and other helps to the ſlothful ſtudent. He is now able, at a very ſmall expence, to join the beau and the ſcholar, and triumphs in the taſte of this enlightened age, of which he hath the comfort to reflect, that he himſelf makes a part. But, for our mortification, let us recollect, that, as ſeveral writers have obſerved, human things never continue long at a ſtand. There is commonly a revolution of knowledge and learning, as of riches and power. For as ſtates grow up from poverty to induſtry, wealth, and power, ſo, from theſe they proceed to luxury, and vice, and by them are brought back to poverty and ſubjection. In the ſame manner, with reſpect to learning, men riſe from ignorance to application, from application to knowledge, this ripens into taſte and judgment, then, from a deſire of diſtinguiſhing themſelves, they ſupperadd affected ornaments, become more fanciful than ſolid, their taſte corrupts with their manners, and they fall back into the gulph of ignorance. The ſeveral ſteps of theſe gradations commonly correſpond; and if we deſire to know in what period of each, we of this nation are at preſent, it is probable, we are in the age of luxury as to the firſt, and, in the eve at leaſt, of a falſe and frothy taſte as to learn-

learning, and may therefore fear, that as a late very elegant writer expreſſes it, We ſhall relapſe faſt into Barbariſm.

Another argument adduced by this author, is, that the apoſtle Paul, in preaching at Athens, quotes a ſentence from one of the Greek poets, and, in writing to the Corinthians, has inſerted into the ſacred text a line from a Greek play which now ſubſiſts.—'This, (he ſays), is ſufficient to connect the defence of plays 'with the honour of ſcripture itſelf.' The fact is not denied, though he has given but a poor ſpecimen of the knowledge of this age, by miſtaking, in the firſt of theſe remarks, the expreſſion quoted by the apoſtle: for, this ſentence, *In him we live, and move, and have our being*, which, he ſays, is a very ſublime expreſſion, and beautifully applied by the apoſtle, was not cited from the poet, but the following, *For we are alſo his offspring*. But ſuppoſing he had, (as he eaſily might) have hit upon the true citation, What follows from it? Did ever any body affirm, that no poet could write, or no player could ſpeak any thing that was true? And what is to hinder an inſpired writer from judging them out of their own mouths? What concern has this with the ſtage? If it implies any defence of the ſtage in general, it muſt imply a ſtronger defence of the particular play and poem, from which the citations are taken. Now, I dare ſay, neither this author, nor any other will aſſert, that theſe are in all reſpects agreeable to the Chriſtian character. Theſe citations do no other way connect the defence of the ſtage with the honour of ſcripture, than a miniſter's citing, in writing or diſcourſe, a paſſage from Horace or Juvenal, would connect the defence of all the obſcenity that is to be found in the reſt of their works, with the honour of preaching.

The only thing further in this eſſay not obviated in the preceeding diſcourſe, is what he ſays on the ſubject of the poor. 'That the expence laid out on the ſtage does not hinder the 'charitable ſupply of the poor, and that they ſuffer no loſs by 'it, for it comes at laſt into the hands of the poor, and is paid

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'as the price of their labour.—Every player must be maintain-'ed, clothed and lodged.' It does not suit with any present purpose to enter into controversial altercation, or to treat this author with that severity he deserves; and therefore I shall only say, that his reasoning upon this subject is the very same from which doctor Mandeville draws this absurd and hated consequence, 'Private vices are public benefits.'

The truth is, a serious person can scarce have a stronger evidence of the immorality of the stage, than the perusal of these little pieces of satyr, which have been published, in so great a variety, against the presbytery of Edinburgh, within these few weeks, because of their public admonition against it. They offer no other defence, but deriding the preaching of the gospel, blasphemously comparing the pulpit with the stage, and recrimination upon some who are supposed to live inconsistently with their character. It is not worth while to spend three words in determining, whether drunkenness, deceit and hypocrisy are worse than the stage or not, but if that is the strongest argument that can be offered in its support, wo to all those who attend it. The new reformed tragedy, has, indeed, been very unlucky in its advocates. There is an old saying, that a man is known by his company. If this be true also of a play, which one would think it should, as it must be chiefly to the taste of congenial minds, by those who have appeared in defence of Douglas, it is a work of very little merit.

It may be expected, that, having brought this performance on the field, I should add some further reflections, upon the aggravated sin of *ministers* writing plays, or attending the stage. But, though it is a very plain point, and indeed because it is so, it would draw out this treatise to an immoderate length. If any man makes a question of this, he must be wholly ignorant of the nature, and importance of the ministerial character and office. These therefore it would be necessary to open up distinctly, and to consider the solemn charge given to ministers in scripture, to

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watch over the ſouls of their people, as thoſe *who muſt give an account unto God*; to give themſelves wholly to their duty, ſince ſome of thoſe committed to them are, from day to day, entering on an unchangeable ſtate, whoſe blood, when they die unconverted, ſhall be required at the hand of the unfaithful paſtor. None can entertain the leaſt doubt upon this ſubject, who believe the teſtimony of Moſes and the prophets, of Chriſt and his apoſtles, and, if they believe not their writings, neither will they believe my words.

Inſtead therefore of endeavouring to prove, I will make bold to affirm, that writing plays is an employment wholly foreign to the office, and attending theatrical repreſentations an entertainment unbecoming the character of a miniſter of Chriſt? And muſt not both, or either of them be a ſacrilegious abſtraction of that time and pains, which ought to have been laid out for the benefit of his people? Is it not alſo flying in the face of a clear and late act of parliament, agreeably to which the lords of council and ſeſſion not long ago found the ſtage contrary to law, in this country? And tho' the law is eluded, and the penalty evaded, by advertiſing a concert after which will be performed *gratis*, a tragedy, *&c.* Yet, ſurely, the world in judging of characters, or a church court in judging of the conduct of its members, will pay no regard to the poor and ſhameful evaſion. Can we then think of this audacious attempt at the preſent juncture, without applying to ourſelves the words of Iſaiah, *And in that day did the Lord God of hoſts call to weeping, and to mourning, and to baldneſs, and to girding with ſackcloth, and behold joy and gladneſs, ſlaying oxen and killing ſheep, eating fleſh and drinkin gwine: let us eat and drink for to morrow we die. And it was revealed in mine ears by the Lord of hoſts, ſurely, this iniquity ſhall not be purged from you till ye die, ſaith the Lord of hoſts,* Iſa. xxii. 12, 13, 14.

FINIS.